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Celebrating 400 years of the First English Baptist Church being founded in Amsterdam

July 2009 will find Baptists from throughout the world converging on Amsterdam to recall Smythe and Helwys and the English exiles meeting in the bakehouse belonging to the Dutch Mennonite, Jan Munter. Readers of *Baptistic Theologies* will certainly desire to be present and full details can be found on the special web site: www.amsterdam400.org.

In connection with this celebration of a prominent Baptist beginning, we draw your attention to the following forthcoming publications that will be launched at Amsterdam 400.

Communities of Conviction: Baptist Beginnings in Europe

Ian M. Randall. Published by the EBF in cooperation with Neufeld-Verlag

This popular illustrated book traces different baptistic beginnings in Europe from the Anabaptists, through the General and Particular Baptists, the New Connexion, the Oncken stream, beginnings in the Slavic lands and in the Middle East. This book will be a must for students, members of Baptist congregations and all interested in who we are and where we come from.

Ian Randall will be at Amsterdam 400 to sign copies

Dictionary of European Baptist Life and Thought

John H.Y. Briggs (Chief Editor). Published by Paternoster

This major work, commissioned by the International Baptist Theological Seminary, offers the first ever Dictionary of a Baptist approach to many ecclesial, theological, liturgical and ethical issues from a European perspective. An essential book for every seminary, scholar, Baptist union official and those interested in a comprehensive but succinct view of Baptist attitudes from Absolution to Zwingli.

Members of the editorial panel will be at Amsterdam 400 to sign copies

The European Baptist Federation, 1950-2006

Keith G. Jones. Published by Paternoster

Examination of the EBF as to its ecclesial reality, its relationship to mission agencies and other Christian world communions, its mission and internal life.

The author will be present at Amsterdam 400 to sign copies

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Editorial

This issue of JEBS is the final number of this academic year, in which IBTS celebrates its Diamond Jubilee. It also comes out as Baptists around the world prepare to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the first English Baptist community gathering in Amsterdam in 1609. Thus it is highly appropriate that our articles this time focus on two of the themes or characteristics which have always been central to Baptist belief and practice. The first is the place of the Bible, the second the nature of the church community.

Our first article is a careful study by Professor Howard Marshall of what the New Testament believers knew or thought about the nature of future post-mortem existence. A version of this article was delivered as a paper at a Biblical Studies colloquium on the theme of life after death in the Bible, held at IBTS. As Prof. Marshall notes at the end of his work, it is perhaps surprising that the imagery about hell is always far more striking than that about heaven. It may be this that has led so many preachers to focus on the threat of hell rather than on the joy of heaven.

Part of what is at stake here is how we interact with the biblical text. Readers of Prof. Marshall's previous work will know that he has always sought to read the text attentively, neither trying to deny or explain away what is there nor putting in what is not there because it would sit more easily with a particular view of how the Christian life should be. Yet these two temptations are frequently present and often colour the way in which the Bible is interpreted.

It is precisely this question of biblical hermeneutics that Alec Gilmore addresses in his article. He shows how a plural and diverse approach to the reading of the Bible has been present in the church since the beginning. This, of course, is not the same as to say that any reading goes. The Bible cannot simply mean whatever we want it to mean. At the same time, it is not always possible to reduce it to just one simple straightforward meaning. The desire to do that, as Alec Gilmore points out, arose in the nineteenth century. It was linked to the increasing tendency to seek scientific explanations for the world. The Bible is, at least in principle, susceptible, in such a view, of a single all-encompassing explanation.

This is seen most clearly in the habit of affirming that one particular verse in the Bible sums up the meaning of the whole. It is to ignore the way in which the Bible shows God interacting with his creation and his people in a vast array of different settings. It also ignores the differences in the way this people interact with their God. The authors of the biblical writings

cannot be reduced to sameness any more than can any other group of people. To put it simply, Isaiah is not Jeremiah is not Matthew is not Luke, and so the list could go on.

There is a continuing widespread theological interest in the subject of ecclesiology in most Christian traditions. We have published several articles on this theme in *JEBS* (for instance, Vol.1/1, Vol. 4/2) and we continue to develop a distinctive understanding of the ecclesiology of baptistic gathering churches. The article by Teun van der Leer, the rector of the Baptist Seminary in the Netherlands, adds to this debate from the perspective of reflection on the topic amongst Baptists in the Netherlands. Apart from its relevance to an issue of such importance to Baptists, we are glad to print this article in celebration of the 400 years since the founding of the first English Baptist Church in Amsterdam and of the 150 years since the founding of the first Dutch Baptist church.

In his article, Teun van der Leer examines the nature of what he calls a ‘believers [*sic*] church’, an expression which has more justification theologically than it does in the generally accepted norms of English grammar and orthography. What difference does it make to understand the church in this way and why is it an important contribution to the ecclesiological debate? These are the questions which the article sets out to examine.

IBTS is an academic institution based in Prague, in the heart of Europe and it stands at the heart of theological investigation in European Baptist life. Thus, as we prepare to celebrate our Diamond Jubilee, these articles also touch on who we are and what we exist to do. One way of understanding theology is as a reflection on the Bible, the word of God, which testifies to the Word of God made flesh, Jesus Christ. However, this reflection always takes place somewhere. The first context is the church, encountered wherever two or three gather in the Lord’s name, coming together to celebrate the gift of faith, freely given and freely received.

The other major context in which our theology takes place is the wider world in which these believers come together. In the first place, for us, that is Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia, the area covered by the European Baptist Federation. The questions of the men and women of this region are necessarily our questions, too, and so we ask them of the Bible and of the church, firm in the assurance that God speaks to us in our days and our situation.

When that first group of English people in exile in Amsterdam met 400 years ago, they did not know where their journey would lead. Neither, when the first few students arrived in Rüschlikon in 1949, did they or the

seminary faculty know where or how things would go forward. But both groups came together in faith, in the certainty that their journey would succeed and would lead somewhere for as long as it was a journey with God, for God and towards God.

At times, the path can seem precarious, and we may be tempted to give up. But theology is one way to enter into a deeper relationship with the God in whom we believe, and thus we journey on in hope. The end of our journey will be to arrive in the fullness of life with God. We, like the first Christians, do not have sufficient language to describe this, because such joy is something we can only faintly glimpse here on earth, and it remains always beyond our language. Yet, we can glimpse it. It is there in the pages of the Scriptures, in all their bounteous diversity. We find it, too, in the coming together of Christians as community, united in faith and love, seeking to live out in service of God and others the hope we have been given.

As it contributes to this service, IBTS can reflect on a job which has been well-started but, thankfully, will remain incomplete as long as the church exists. To reflect on God's word, on the saving power of Jesus Christ, on the Spirit who animates the church and the world, such is the task of theology. While people exist on the earth, this task will never end, for each of us individually and together, are called to new life, to die and to rise in baptism with Christ, and one day to be with him for all eternity. However difficult the journey sometimes may seem, of this we can be sure.

Tim Noble
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How did the early Christians know anything about future states?

I. Howard Marshall

The joyous hope of sharing in a blessed afterlife and the matching fear of being condemned to a cursed state (Matt 25:46) play a dominant role in many, but not all, manifestations of the Christian religion¹ and indeed of other religions also. The purpose of this paper is primarily to enquire into the sources of knowledge of the final state displayed by the New Testament writers. We shall circumscribe the enquiry by putting on one side questions concerning the nature of the initiatory events, namely the last day, the parousia, the general resurrection and the final judgment² and attempt to deal rather with the question: What is the ‘eternal state’ that is depicted as following the final judgment like, and how did early Christians know anything about it? Consideration will also need to be given to any preliminary post-mortem state before the final judgment.

Possible sources of information

Possible sources of information for early Christians might include:

1. Teaching in the Old Testament, regarded as divine revelation.
2. Influences from the surrounding world, both Jewish and Gentile, which consciously or unconsciously affected people’s thinking.
3. Teaching given by Jesus before his death, regarded as based on revelation from God the Father to him.
4. Teaching given by Jesus after his death, regarded as based on his personal knowledge of the spiritual or heavenly world.³
5. Teaching from apostles and prophets such as Paul, based on revelations received from God. Here we are thinking of essentially verbal communications.

¹ For a remarkably succinct but comprehensive survey of the whole area see R.J. Bauckham, ‘Eschatology’, in Howard Marshall et al. (eds.), *New Bible Dictionary*, (NBD) (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1996), pp. 333-39.

² This area has been covered by recent writers on the resurrection (such as N.T. Wright and D.C. Allison Jr.).

³ It does not appear likely that such specific individuals as Jairus’ daughter, Lazarus or Eutychus, all of whom went through the experience of dying and being resuscitated, gave any information about their experience that has influenced the New Testament writers. Since nothing is said anywhere to encourage supposing that such a communication took place, I ignore it.

6. Teaching from apostles and prophets such as Paul or John the Seer, based on divine visions that might be presented in terms of their being caught up to heaven and seeing what cannot normally be seen.
7. Reasoned thinking based on any of the above or general knowledge leading to fresh deductions and conclusions.⁴
8. Imaginative depiction.

1. The Old Testament evidence

There is not a lot in the OT on this topic. The notions of a cosmic judgment and an after-state for human beings are hardly more than marginal. Some scholars helpfully distinguish between incidental references that presume the post-mortem consciousness or existence of the dead⁵ and passages that more explicitly affirm an after-life. P.S. Johnston is authoritative and typical:

The OT has no clear concept of future unimpaired communion with God and perfect harmony with others, though it occasionally glimpses some undefined form of positive afterlife.⁶⁷

In the OT narrative most people simply die and go to be with their ancestors buried in the earth. It may be crude, but my impression of the OT teaching is that a grave is like the entry into a tunnel or shaft down which the dead person travels to a common grave in the underworld, Sheol, along with everybody else. There are tensions here, because people are aware that a corpse placed in a grave remains there, although it rots away and only the bones survive. What survives is apparently a ‘shade’, and the later distinction between body and soul as two separate components, the former of which decays and the latter survives, is thought not to be present.

⁴ Any of the above would be regarded by later Christians as divine revelation. Scholars who believe in the active divine inspiration of Scripture distinguish two broad types of inspiration, namely: (a) the more narrowly prophetic inspiration in which a person is conscious of receiving a divine revelation and transmits it to other people; and (b) the general inspiration in which God so guided the thinking, speaking and writing of people that their writing of material such as history or fiction or legal codes or whatever became the mode of God saying what he wanted to say through ‘divine discourse’ (on which see N. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995)).

⁵ The survival of the dead in some kind of manner is attested by the popular belief in necromancy, which was severely frowned upon, but whose reality is seen in the story of Saul calling up the shade of Samuel (1 Sam 28).

⁶ P.S. Johnston, ‘Heaven’, in B.S. Rosner, T.D. Alexander, et.al. (eds.), *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity & Diversity of Scripture (NDBT)* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), pp. 540-42 (541). Cf. also ‘Hell’, in *NDBT*, pp. 542-44; ‘Life, Disease and Death’, in T.D. Alexander, D. Baker (eds.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch (DOTP)* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), pp. 532-36; ‘Death and Afterlife’, in B. Arnold, H.G.M. Williamson, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books (DOTHB)* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), pp. 215-19, summarising his detailed study, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity/Leicester: Apollos, 2002).

⁷ Johnston, ‘Heaven’, p. 541.

The description in Isaiah 14:4-20 is of a mix of kings in their tombs, some who are unburied, and a communal Sheol where the shades can talk to one another, and comment on the maggots and worms surrounding the latest corpse to arrive.

God, however, is thought to be up beyond the sky, but a direct ascent of dead people to heaven is extremely rare (Elijah is an obvious example, 2 Kings 2:1-12; Enoch is a possible other candidate, Gen 5:24). There are occasional accounts of the resuscitation of recently deceased people.

A clear hope of resurrection is found in Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:1-4. The latter passage probably belongs to the latest strata in the OT. In Isaiah 26, after the people's assertion, 'they (sc. human lords) are now dead, they live no more; their spirits do not rise' (Isa 26:14) we have the affirmation 'your dead will live, Lord; their bodies will rise (Isa 26:19). Here the LXX uses *anistemi* and *egeiro*, but there is no reference to the bodies or spirits of the dead. The very next verse (Isa 26:20) is cited in Hebrews 10:37a, thus indicating that the passage was known to at least one New Testament author.⁸ There is nothing here about the situation after resurrection.

Some passages in the Psalms and Job proclaim how the writer will not see death but will enjoy the presence of the Lord (Pss. 16:10-11; 49:15; 73:24; Job 19:25-26), and, although some of these may originally refer to escape from premature death and joyous communion with the Lord in this world, I find it hard to believe that this exhausts their meaning. Some of the New Testament uses suggest that a fuller meaning was found in them. However, no communications reveal the character of the heavenly world apart from the court scenes in Job and 1 Kings 22:19-23 and the vision of Isaiah 6.⁹

Other OT passages look forward to a renewed world in which creation is renewed and people live together in harmony (Isa 11:6-9; 65:17-25). The book of Isaiah, taken as a whole, is equivocal on death; in Isaiah 25:8 God will swallow it up for ever, whereas in 65:20 people do not die prematurely but live to a ripe old age, after which they presumably die. The concept of a new heaven and a new earth is present in Isaiah 65:17 and found its way into the NT. It is difficult to tell exactly what is envisaged in such passages; it does appear to be a semi-renewal of life on this earth without some of the corruption brought about by the fall. Moreover, if we bear in mind the conditional nature of much prophecy, this may be no more

⁸ There are also some possible echoes of Isaiah 27 in the NT (the serpent; the 'great trumpet') and Isaiah 28 is certainly used in the NT.

⁹ Ezekiel 1 appears to be a theophany or vision in the sky rather than in a heaven beyond it.

than a vision of what God would do if his people were faithful and obedient.

In summary, for most of OT religion the after-state is simply not taken into account, still less thematised. It has virtually no theological significance and is not used to any great extent pastorally. However, several of the few references that we have noted are picked up or echoed in the NT.

2. The inter-testamental developments

The New Testament differs from the Old in the much greater prominence of the notion of an afterlife and in the content of that notion. Both of these differences, however, can already be seen in the inter-testamental period. The ‘eschatology’ of the Jews developed greatly during this period, giving rise to a variety of expectations and conceptualisations.¹⁰

In Hellenistic culture belief in immortality was widespread, and this probably affected many Jews. The idea of a mortal body and immortal soul was common. For Philo, death was the separation and release of the soul, but what happened to it was not clear. According to Josephus the souls of the righteous pass into other bodies but the souls of the wicked suffer eternal punishment. Both apparently go to the underworld. The Sadducees did not believe in any kind of survival. The Essene view was similar to the Pharisaic, but the good souls go to an abode beyond the ocean. Josephus himself held that the souls of the righteous go to heaven and then return to the renewed earth in bodies. Sanders warns that Josephus was trying to communicate Jewish ideas ‘in Greek dress’. Resurrection may be present at Qumran (4Q521; 4Q385; cf. 4Q386; cf. 1QH 11 [3]:19-23; 14 [6]:29-30) and eternal life and glory (1QS 4:7-8), but also eternal punishment in fire (1QS 4:12-14).¹¹ All this is combined with a strong belief in a new earth and a new age to which good souls will return. The apocalyptic literature is strong on the torments felt by the wicked as an everlasting punishment. In 2 Enoch there are levels in heaven (including a hell at the fifth level, 2 Enoch 18), and the same kind of picture is presented in 3 Baruch, but hell is a subterranean sea of fire in Apocalypse of Zephaniah 6; 10. Unfortunately the dates and provenances of much of this material are quite uncertain.

¹⁰ For this summary see E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE* (London: SCM Press, 1992), pp. 298-303. See further D.S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (London: SCM Press, 1964), pp. 353-90. There is no single entry in C. Evans, S. Porter (eds.), *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds (DNTB)* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000). See articles on ‘Eschatologies of Late Antiquity’ (J.J. Collins, pp. 330-37); ‘Heavenly Ascent in Jewish and Pagan Traditions’ (J.M. Scott, pp. 447-52); ‘Resurrection’ (G.R. Osborne, pp. 931-36). Further material in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary (ABD)* (see fn. 12 below).

¹¹ J.J. Collins, *DNTB*, p. 335.

There is much visionary material in the so-called apocalyptic literature.¹² However, this literature is generally pseudonymous, and it is not clear whether the visionary material actually came to the writers in visions or in what they took to be visions or is in reality nothing more than a fictitious literary construction; the boundaries between these categories may have been difficult to draw. Christian believers probably assume that the author of Revelation was, as he says, caught up to heaven; they probably also assume that the visionaries outside Scripture simply made up their stories.

3. The New Testament imagery

Developed Christianity, as noted above, shifts the emphasis considerably from the Old Testament. A conspicuous role is played by the concept of the parousia, the coming of a heavenly being into the visible heavens and apparently down to earth itself to act as God's agent in establishing, or re-establishing his rule. The lines between the earthly and the heavenly may become blurred in such a prospect. The prominence of belief in the coming of the Son of Man would inevitably encourage interest in what was to happen thereafter. But how did people come to know what they thought that they knew about it?

Types of communication

The rich man and Lazarus

The story in Luke 16:19-31 is one of those parables which at first sight appears to describe what actually happens on the 'spiritual' level, just like the story of the Pharisee and the tax-collector which also is not pictorial but real.¹³ It is interesting that the parable of the sheep and the goats is similar in describing the judgment itself.¹⁴ The story need be no more than a fictitious story, but the setting of the events could be 'real'. The rich man is buried and finds himself in Hades, and there he is in torment: Hades is expressly described as a place of fire from which the rich man seeks relief for his tongue, as if he had a living physical body and is not just a skeleton.

¹² The whole area has been covered exhaustively by R. Bauckham, and there is literally nothing that I could add to his encyclopaedic knowledge of it. His many articles are gathered together in R. Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Leiden: Brill, 1998). For a summary of part of the material see his article 'Descent to the Underworld', *ABD*, II, pp. 145-59; cf. 'Hades, Hell', *ABD* III, pp. 14-15. This is complemented by J.D. Tabor, 'Heaven, Ascent to', *ABD* III, pp. 91-94.

¹³ Some use the term 'exemplary' for these parables in which relations between God and people are directly described rather than human situations which are similar to divine-human ones.

¹⁴ The comparison with sheep and goats takes place within the narration of the parable and is quite incidental.

The poor man and Abraham are together, apparently at table (the reversal of fortunes and the comparison elsewhere in the teaching of Jesus and in Revelation of the blessed afterlife to a feast combine to support this inference). There is reversal of fortune from earthly bliss to post-mortem agony.

The two key questions are: 1. Is this a description of an intermediate state or a final state?; and 2. Is Jesus teaching what it is really like or simply using the current imagery shared by his audience to tell a story and make a point within this horizon?

The rich man and the poor man are in different kinds of place. It is almost a matter of definition whether we say *different places*, Hades and somewhere else, or *different parts of the one place*, Hades.¹⁵ Such a division is possible before or after the last judgment. A situation before the judgment ties in with the picture in Jude 6; 2 Peter 2:4, according to which rebellious angels are being kept in chains in Tartarus until the judgment. The decisive factor is that the time envisaged must be immediately after the deaths of the two men, since the rich man still has brothers on earth; this clearly shows that a final judgment cannot yet have taken place, unless it be assumed that everybody is finally judged directly after their death. The parable must be picturing an immediate fate.

The imagery of the parable has parallels in the Jewish story of Bar Ma‘jan, which in turn has earlier parallels, all relating the contrasting fate of two people separated from each other by a river or other barrier across which they can see each other.¹⁶ But there are other stories in folklore which are similar, and dependence on this particular one is not necessarily the case.¹⁷ The story, therefore, may be nothing more than the use by Jesus of this story motif supplemented by the conversation with Abraham and the possibility of a messenger coming back from the dead.¹⁸ In any case, it is unwarranted to press the details of the story, such as visibility, movement, memory and acuteness of perception.¹⁹

¹⁵ Green following Bauckham (*ABD* III, pp. 14-15) thinks these may be two places within Hades. For Hades as the abode of all the dead see: SB IV, 1017-1019; II:228; Jos., Ant. 18:14; Bel 2:163; 3:375. It is the destination of the righteous in 2 Macc 6:23; 1 Enoch 102:4-5; and of the unrighteous in Ps Sol 14:6, 9-10; 15:10. However, the righteous are also depicted in heaven (1 Enoch 39).

¹⁶ For visibility see 4 Ezra 7:85, 93; 2 Bar 51:5-6 Fitz 1132; Bock II, 1369. Creed, 213.

¹⁷ Cf. Bauckham, ‘Rich Man’, pp. 225-31.

¹⁸ For more detailed discussion see I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), pp. 632-39.

¹⁹ See, for example, the warnings by C.L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), pp. 203-208.

In his discussion of this parable Bauckham notes three possible ways in which people might learn about the afterlife:²⁰

a. A living person visits the world of the dead or heaven, often by means of a dream or vision. The vision of John the Seer is presented as an example of this kind of experience.

b. A person undergoes a temporary period of death (like Jairus' daughter or Lazarus) and then returns to life with an account of what they have seen and experienced. Bauckham includes here the possibility that the dead person may be called up by necromancy, but this would not be a case of temporary death followed by normal life for an indefinite period but rather of temporary return from the dead by a permanently dead person.

c. A dead person may revisit this world in a dream or vision to somebody. Sometimes such people reveal something about their present state. In this case, however, would it not be fair to say that the dead person remains in the realm of the dead but the living person has a vision of that person? Or is it fair to say that the boundary between the real and the visionary is fluid? The difference from possibility a. would be that in the former the living person goes to the world of the dead, whether in reality or vision, whereas in this possibility the dead person visits the world of the living, whether in reality or through the medium of a vision.

In the light of this categorisation Bauckham discusses the requested visit by Lazarus and asks whether the possibility envisaged is that Lazarus should return to earthly life after a temporary death or should pay a temporary visit (by appearing as a ghost or in a dream). Maybe the story does not give us sufficient information to tell what was envisaged. In the case of temporary death, the stories are generally about the resuscitation of a recently deceased person and their actual body is resuscitated. Hence a temporary visit is to be envisaged.

More relevantly to our enquiry, Bauckham says that the point of the story is that *nobody will return with such information*; people ought to repent on the strength of what the law says about justice, and that should be adequate to persuade them. So the story itself is not to be seen as providing such information.

But this seems to me to be a questionable conclusion. For the story does give this information despite itself to anybody who reads Luke's gospel! This would make the story self-inconsistent. In fact, what the parable says is that, even if somebody did come back, it would still not

²⁰ R.J. Bauckham, 'The Rich Man and Lazarus: The Parable and the Parallels', *NT* 37 (1991), pp. 225-46 (reprinted in *Fate*, pp. 97-118).

change people who do not listen to Moses! It leaves open the question whether this possibility will be fulfilled or not. Bauckham, then, is right in what he says but wrong in what he denies. The thought is close to that in John 5:46-47 where Jesus comments that it is clear that his Jewish opponents do not listen to Moses; this is evident because, if they did so, they would believe Jesus, because Moses wrote about him (presumably in Deut 18). The fact that, having studied the Scriptures, they do not come to Jesus about whom they testify, indicates their failure to understand them or their unwillingness to obey them.²¹

Granted that in the appearance stories the risen Christ appears only to his disciples and not to unbelievers, there is the exception of his appearance to the unbelieving Saul of Tarsus, and there are people today who have been converted through what they believed to be a visionary experience of the risen Christ. Many people have been known to repent through hearing about judgment and the after-life. Such preaching affected me considerably at a young age and led me to seek salvation. The fact that Jesus is preached as having come back from the dead and calling people to repent and believe reinforces the message of the Jewish Scriptures and makes it the more credible.

Jesus as revealer?

During his earthly life, Jesus says little about the after-state. He believes in the resurrection of the dead. Somehow he knows that there will be no marriage at that time and by implication no procreation. He knows that the angels do not marry, and he states that the same is true of human beings (Mark 12:18-27). How does he know this? It could simply be a belief based on the silence of the Scriptures about angels marrying and an argument by analogy from them to other denizens of heaven.

As we have just observed, despite the warning in the parable that a messenger from the dead will not be able to persuade sinners to repent, Jesus himself does come back from the dead. He does not appear directly to unbelievers (except Saul), but indirectly he does so through the witness to his resurrection by the apostles. But there is no record of any post-mortem teaching by him on the nature of the after-life and the division of destinies.

During his earthly life he is represented as referring to the ‘resting places [*monai*]’ in the Father’s ‘house’. He is going to prepare a ‘place’ (*topos*) for his followers (Jn 14:2-3). The language is very formal and lacking in content. The popular interpretation thinks of something akin to a

²¹ In the context, it would seem more likely that John understands Jesus to mean the latter; early Christians took it for granted that the Scriptures obviously testified to Jesus, even though presumably orthodox Jews would have strongly denied it.

large guesthouse with lots of rooms for the guests, a sort of heavenly Hilton or Holiday Inn. The point of Jesus' saying would seem to be simply the plenitude of the space available, enough for all who have faith and want to come to God. The metaphor continues as Jesus talks of going ahead to 'prepare a place', like a tour guide making arrangements for accommodation for the party.

The evidence for teaching about the future state by Jesus is thus sparse. He functions neither as a temporary visitor to the unseen world nor as a messenger who comes from that world after death to describe what he has seen in any detail.

Visions of Jesus in Acts

Later, however, there are what purport to be visions of him glorified.²² In Acts 7:55 Stephen is inspired by the Spirit to see into heaven, observes Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and then reports what he has seen. This is a classic case of a brief vision in which somebody is, as it were, able to see through a door or window into heaven, and to report to others. But there are no details to report.

A second case in Acts is that of Saul of Tarsus; he is surrounded by bright light, and hears the voice of Jesus. Ananias says that Paul saw Jesus, or rather that he let himself be seen by him (pressing the passive). In 22:6 again there is the light and Saul hears the voice, and again Ananias says that Saul was chosen to see the Righteous One and hear his voice. Likewise in 26:13-18 Saul is surrounded by light and hears a voice. Christ speaks of appearing to him and Saul refers to it as a heavenly vision.

Thus in each case the narrative records that Saul sees a bright light and hears the voice of the Lord, but the subsequent report or 'commentary' is about seeing the Lord and having a vision. It is important that there is blinding bright light. Jesus is evidently glorified; he is seen as the Lord, possibly as the judge, but there is nothing about revelation of heavenly secrets. The glory of the Lord overshadows absolutely everything else.

There is a further report of Paul going into the temple where he was 'in an ecstasy/trance' and saw the Lord speaking to him (22:17-18). Again, the Lord speaks to Paul in a vision during the night (Acts 18:9-10). Both of these experiences would seem to be dreams or visions with visible and auditory elements. They would seem to be cases of the Lord coming to Paul rather than of Paul going to be in heaven.

²² Mt 28:16-20 is ambiguous. It appears to be an appearance of Jesus on earth in ordinary human form, but he claims divine authority.

Other Pauline material

In 2 Corinthians 12:2-7 Paul tells how he was caught up to the third heaven or paradise, and does not know whether it was in the body or out of it. There he heard inexpressible things that no one is permitted to tell. He says nothing about seeing anything and he does not repeat the inexpressible things. They were exceptional revelations.

The comment leaves it open whether Paul merely had a vision or was actually taken up to heaven, as a temporary visitor. The mode need not worry us for our present concern. The significant point is that the event may account for anything that Paul says elsewhere about the heavenly world; alongside the inexpressible things there may have been expressible things that are mentioned elsewhere (although I cannot identify any). We cannot, therefore, rule out the possibility of Paul relying on personal memory of such revelations. Is there an allusion to such revelations in 1 Corinthians 2:9-10 where Paul mentions the things revealed to us by the Spirit which lie beyond human experience but have been prepared by God for those who love him?

The visions in Revelation

The situation is different in Revelation. Here the author says that he was ‘in the spirit’ (Rev 1:10), a condition in which he heard a heavenly voice and was able to see the speaker who spoke at some length; eventually the speaker invited John up into heaven; he had a trance and the rest of the book is largely an account of what he saw (and heard) as if in heaven (Rev 4:1-2). From heaven he could also see what happens on earth, apparently as a pre-view of what would happen later; whether this means that he saw in a vision a portrayal of what would happen or was carried forward in time to view events as they happen is not clear and maybe not a real question. For the most part the story is told as if John is watching it happening in sequence by contrast with the sort of prophecy that is cast in the future tense of what God will do (or threatens to do if people do not repent). Some events are described from the point of view of an onlooker on earth (Rev 12). So the story runs on right into the eternal state when the new heaven and earth replace the old ones. Curiously John is taken up in the Spirit as late as 21:10 and some of the description is put in the future tense (21:24-22:5). And the message that John receives is not to be kept to himself but shared with the people, both believers and unbelievers.

John’s teaching is thus presented as a record of a vision. However, the majority of commentators examine it in the light of its reminiscences of the Old Testament and its use of imagery that was available in John’s world; this approach is justified by its fruitfulness in throwing light on the

material. The question as to the relationship between vision and poetic creativity obviously needs to be answered.

When people have dreams in the real world, the material that shapes them is drawn from what is floating around (often unconsciously) in their memories, however much it may be reshaped in bizarre and unreal ways. Presumably, it could be argued, this could be the case with visions that John had where he sees and hears things that he describes using the means of description and comparison that he had. God, after all, will speak in ways that are meaningful to earthly people. The variety of the images and the sheer impossibility of harmonising them confirms the fact that they are images and not literal descriptions, and probably also the implication is that the spiritual world to come cannot be described in earthly terms, although these earthly terms can be metaphorical of a reality beyond our ken.

Putting together this fuller picture in Revelation, with the hints elsewhere in the New Testament, we look at the two different futures that are described.

The fate of the unsaved

One prominent image is that of fire,²³ and this takes two forms.²⁴ There is the depiction of the state of the unsaved in terms of a lake of burning sulphur where the wicked are ‘tormented day and night for ever and ever’ (Rev 20:10; cf. 14:10-11; 19:20).²⁵ This is a wet or liquid type of fate compared with the other imagery of Gehenna, which is more like a gigantic dry bonfire that is continually refuelled (Mk 9:43, 48). This little, but real, difference should warn us against taking either form of the imagery too literally.²⁶

Again, one type of description is in terms of destruction or perishing, a phrase that would normally signify a process that has an end when nothing is left but ashes. Another type of description assumes the consciousness of the dead.²⁷ For example, they have the capacity to weep and gnash their teeth (Mt 8:12), a detail which is expressed in terms of physical embodiment. Similarly, they are able to see the lights of the house where the blessed have their meal, though in darkness or semi-darkness themselves. There is the typical combination of literal and metaphorical

²³ Fire: Isa 66:24; Sir 21:9-10; 1 Enoch 10:13-14; 63:10; Mark 9:48; Rev 19:12.

²⁴ In both cases there are extra-biblical parallels using the imagery.

²⁵ Torment: 1 Enoch 22; 2 Clem 10:4; 17:7 Bock II, 1370.

²⁶ Such combinations of apparently irreconcilable pictures are found elsewhere and show that people did not find them incongruous; thus in 2 Enoch 10:2 fire and freezing conditions are listed side by side.

²⁷ Similarly, in the apocalyptic literature, passages about eternal torment (1 Enoch 22:11) seen by the godly (1 Enoch 27:3) stand alongside pictures of utter destruction (1 Enoch 91:19).

here, in that we have two separate images of fire, and there is visibility between the places of the saved and the lost, and despite being destroyed by fire the latter are still able to see and speak. Those who want to take the descriptions literally can no doubt argue that people being burnt on a pyre can still see what is going on around them or across the street. Another possibility is that the seeing and the weeping are metaphorical of what happens at the moment of judgment before exclusion from life and bliss. But in any case, surely we are dealing with spiritual states and with billions of people, so a simple literalism is ruled out.

Alongside this broad concept is the description of the fate of the wicked as a second death (Rev 2:11) and the frequent use of the term ‘destroy’. God is able to destroy both body and soul in Gehenna (Mt 10:28). Were it not for the existence of the first type of imagery, I do not think that it would occur to anybody to take this language in anything other than a literal sense of something equivalent to destruction and death, in which the body is partially or wholly destroyed and life becomes extinct. The lost are excluded from the beneficial presence of God.²⁸ They can be regarded either as relegated to an area where God’s power still keeps them in existence or as simply ceasing to exist.

The ultimate source of the imagery is probably Isaiah 66:24 ‘they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who have rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to the whole human race’. This picture would appear to be of dead corpses perhaps on a battlefield, where some are being destroyed by fire and others are eaten by worms, and the destruction is irreversible and lasts ‘for ever’. There is nothing here to indicate that the dead are other than unconscious. Hence there is no suggestion of torment, finite or everlasting after they have been put to death. Part of their fate is that they are never buried and their bodies are treated with contempt. Johnston suggests that Isaiah’s picture is probably set in Gehenna.²⁹

Some part may also be played by Genesis 19:24, 28, where Sodom and Gomorrah are overwhelmed by burning sulphur that comes down from heaven and dense smoke arises from them. In Isaiah 34:9-10 Edom is turned into a land of burning sulphur and pitch that will not be quenched, but the smoke will rise for ever; this is followed by a description of a land turned back into a wilderness where animals and birds find their home. In both cases the imagery would seem to be that of volcanic eruptions which can cause both clouds of destruction to rain down from above and streams

²⁸ R.J. Bauckham, *NBD*, p. 338.

²⁹ P. Johnston, *NDBT*, p. 543.

of lava that flow across the land. The picture of the burning lake of fire in Revelation suggests a volcanic pool.

Similar imagery of fire being rained down is contained in earlier chapters of Revelation, where we have so-called apocalyptic pictures of what is to happen in this world. The final fate is portrayed in a way that might be understood as an extension of this on a greater and final scale (Rev 8:5, 7; cf. Ps 11:6; Dan 7:10).³⁰ However, the New Testament material is considerably more restrained than that in the apocalyptic literature.³¹

Such descriptions are making use of imagery drawn from human life and magnified enormously.

Imagery regarding the saved

Over against the unsaved we have the saved. They go to eternal life and the presence of God. These two notions are to be regarded as complementary (Jn 17:3). Eternal life consists in communion with God, which is assumed to be blissful and desirable.

1. The concept of God sitting on a throne like an earthly king surrounded by his attendants is found in the OT (and Graeco-Roman mythologies and...) and is a natural picture to use. It reappears in Daniel 7, and its application to figure like a Son of Man controls NT usage.

It is not a big step from this picture to the concept of heaven as a temple in which God is worshipped. The temple and the royal court are essentially similar/related concepts. The former includes the concept of offering of sacrifices. The plan for the original tabernacle entrusted to Moses is a heavenly ‘pattern I will show you’ (Exod 25:9, 40; Heb 8:5). This appears to have been understood to refer to a heavenly temple, of which the earthly one is a copy. Did Moses see the actual heavenly temple in a vision or a picture of what he was to do? Does Exodus imply a heavenly temple? Certainly in the light of such a passage as those that depict God on his throne in heaven the deduction could have been made.

2. The heavenly banquet in a house. This image is used by Jesus. The nearest OT background seems to be in Isaiah 25:6ff. Here God makes a feast of rich food for all peoples ‘on this mountain’, presumably Mount Zion; there is rich food and drink, and death is swallowed up for ever; by

³⁰ This feature may perhaps raise the question whether the descriptions of judgment preceding the final judgment in Revelation are really about the final judgment, but this seems unlikely in view of the fact that they are more in the nature of awful warnings.

³¹ Ibid., Bauckham.

contrast Moab will be trampled down. This is a this-worldly hope.³² The motif is found in apocalyptic. People eat and drink with the Son of Man (1 Enoch 62:14); paradise is compared to the joy of a dinner for a man's best friends (2 Enoch 42:5); there is abundance of fruit and meat (2 Baruch 29:4, 5-6; cf. 4 Ezra 6:49-52).

More specifically it becomes the marriage supper of the Messiah/Lamb, but whether it is envisaged as going on for ever is not clear. Most human fairy stories have the couple celebrating marriage and then, we are told, 'they lived happily ever after', even if that stage in their existence seems to be dull and empty by comparison with the adventures that preceded and not worth recording in the story. One might wonder whether life in heaven is boring.

3. The heavenly city. This picture is developed in Revelation and is clearly an elaboration of the concept of the new Jerusalem. The heavenly house expands beyond a mega-hotel to being a mega-city, and the imagery is clearly not to be taken literally. Elements of the idea of paradise as a garden also enter into the portrayal.

Little, if any, of this requires that we postulate an actual vision by John (or the other writers); a creative use of salvation-imagery would suffice.

Trying to draw conclusions

We have seen that there are various ways in which information might become available:

1. Use of the Old Testament. This is the ultimate biblical source of ideas of Hades, Gehenna, resurrection and glory, communion with God as the highest good, and God as king and judge. These ideas may undergo development, but the language used reflects the OT and ultimately rests upon it. This raises the question of the origin of the OT material, but that lies outside my scope.

2. Influences from the surrounding world, both Jewish and Gentile. There is some assimilation of this material. Parallels can be seen in the degree of interest shown in the matter by comparison with the Old Testament and in the use of earthly imagery for spiritual realities.

3. Traditions of teaching from Jesus before his death, regarded as based on revelation from God the Father to him. There is very little of this.

³²Other passages are hardly relevant (e.g. Isa 65:13-14), especially the descriptions of birds and animals eating the dead in an act of utter judgment and destruction (Ezek 32:4; 39:17-20).

4. Teaching from Jesus after his death, regarded as based on his personal knowledge of the spiritual or heavenly world. His resurrection is seen as proof of life after death and exemplary of spiritual existence. But there is very little if any direct teaching about the world to come.
5. Teaching from apostles and prophets such as Paul, based on (verbal) revelations received from God. Such teaching as there is deals mostly with the exaltation of Christ, his role as judge and the nature of the resurrection of believers, the parousia and associated events.
6. Teaching from apostles and prophets such as Paul or John the Seer, based on divine visions that might be presented in terms of their being caught up to heaven and seeing what cannot normally be seen. Essentially this is confined to Revelation, where a highly symbolical picture is presented with God and Christ at the centre.
7. Reasoned thinking based on any of the above or general knowledge leading to fresh deductions and conclusions. This is certainly present.
8. Imaginative ideas. The line between this and the previous category is a vague one, and such material can be present. It will be an attempt to find human imagery to express the inexpressible and must be assessed in terms of its faithfulness to the divine revelation elsewhere in Scripture.

From this we may conclude as follows:

1. There is very little interest in the actual nature of the after-life and we are in fact given very little information about it. With the exception of Revelation, little is to be learned regarding the nature of the after-life whether before or after the parousia, resurrection and ensuing judgment. This suggests that much biblical religion is concerned with the here and now, even though it has been established that we cannot live without a future hope. This emphasis differs from that of much popular religion which majors on the after-state.
2. There is a recognition that the bliss of the life to come is beyond words (1 Cor 2:9;³³ 2 Cor 12:4), and this feeling may have inhibited enquiry into the unseen.
3. Concerning the righteous there are four main points. First, God's people are to glorify him for ever. A major element in Revelation is the glorification of God in heaven by all beings. Something of this comes out in Ephesians 1 where the creation of a holy and blameless people as his sons and daughters is to the praise of his glory; the unity of all things in

³³ But Paul's affirmation that God has revealed them to us may be thought to militate against interpreting the verse in this way.

Christ including ourselves is likewise to the praise of his glory, and the consummation of salvation in final redemption is likewise to the praise of his glory (Eph 1:6, 12, 14). Formulae about the glorification of God ‘for ever and ever’ make the same point.

4. A second element is that his people are to enjoy him for ever.³⁴ There is a personal relationship with the Father and the Son which is also related to the activity of the Spirit. This fellowship finds expression in the use of meal imagery.

5. Third, there is a perfecting of God’s people, they become holy and blameless, apparently in a complete and final sense. All that is evil and all that makes for sin and pain and sorrow is excluded, and this includes all that is imperfect and corruptible, so that there is perfection and peace. The glorification of God includes the glorification of his people.

6. Fourth, these three activities all have a corporate character which suggests that the fellowship created by common participation in the Spirit continues but now manifests itself in the fullest measure. The implication is that human personality continues to exist and with it the inter-relationships of human beings, although this is not particularly prominent in the New Testament. The well-known statement that there is no marriage in heaven, may be thought to militate against this conclusion, but C.F.D. Moule is probably right to say that all human relationships are upgraded in heaven to something even better rather than that they are all downgraded so that my relationship to my wife is somehow less than it was on earth rather than more.

7. All this takes place in the spiritual realm and those who participate in it have spiritual bodies, i.e. whatever corresponds to the earthly body for life in a spiritual realm.³⁵ Spiritual and bodily would normally be exclusive categories, but the miracle of resurrection is that these opposites come together in a new creation. Similarly, there is a new creation of a new earth which is not separated from heaven as the habitation of God’s people.

This summary may sound spartan and cold and formal. It is curious how much awe-ful imagery can be used to describe what Hell is like, but we are very poor at doing the corresponding feat of imagination for Heaven.³⁶

³⁴ These two elements are found in the famous first question and answer of the Shorter Catechism concerning ‘man’s chief end’. It is not surprising that they sum up the ideal activity in the life to come.

³⁵ Since there is no marriage, it is to be presumed that there is no pro-creation of new children of God.

³⁶ There is also much material on the fate of the unrighteous in terms of God’s wrath and judgment issuing in destruction. We have passed over the portrayal of the fate of the ungodly in pictures drawn from the contemporary world and magnified infinitely: spirits are kept in chains in dungeons until the judgment; the dead are kept in the realm of death. It is not clear whether there is anything corresponding

On a practical level I conclude:

Speculation about the eternal state is not to be encouraged. Nevertheless, the amount of revelation that we have been given should be sufficient to encourage us to seek to make our calling and election sure. 'The thoughts of such amazing bliss should constant joys create' (I. Watts).

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to consciousness or not; the impression is that the wicked are not punished ahead of the judgment. There is an enormous amount of painful judgment in Revelation before and after the last judgment. The former is expressed in terms of dreadful plagues and natural disasters. Questions arise as to what this means in real terms. Are we to think of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, of battle scenes the world over, and the appalling fate of people caught up in terrorism? The difficulty here is the random, indiscriminate nature of these occurrences and the way in which the comparatively innocent suffer alongside the manifestly guilty, or even more so on occasion.

As for the post-judgment state, it could be shown a. that the unrighteous and unrepentant are cut off from God and his blessings; b. that this is the consequence, penalty, punishment for their sin, and is appropriate for their rejection of God; c. that the imagery represents the worst fates imaginable in human terms and is meant to indicate how great is the loss for those who do not repent, but to take it literally is inappropriate.

Maximising our Inheritance: A Broad Brush Approach to Biblical Hermeneutics

Alec Gilmore

Introduction

This paper has two starting points. On the one hand, a couple of recent books on how we read the Bible. On the other, the arrival in the last 20-30 years of a plethora of new readings and interpretations — feminist, liberationist, third world, African-American, ecological, and so on — together with some deliberately stirred-up controversies on sensitive theological, social, moral and ethical issues, with creationism and homosexuality heading the list. This leaves many Christians, never mind the general public, wondering what the Bible really says, what they can believe and who is right.

My purpose is simply to set the issues in a wider context and I begin with two books.

In a recent semi-popular book¹ Karen Armstrong sets out to analyse the origins of the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament and the story of how they became sacred texts, in the course of which she illustrates the history with examples of the varieties of interpretation over 2000-3000 years, and the social, political and religious issues which lay behind them, from Jewish Midrash to more recent Christian fundamentalism and post-modernism.

A handful of her conclusions are clear and striking.

- 1 People who take refuge in biblical literalism need to be reminded that an exclusively literal approach to the Bible is a recent development.
- 2 A literal interpretation of Genesis 1 is a 19th century phenomenon.
- 3 Jews and Christians for centuries have enjoyed highly allegorical and inventive exegesis in a world where literalism was neither possible nor desirable.
- 4 Competing visions appear side by side in both Old and New Testaments.
- 5 Passages with no intrinsic connection are linked together.

¹ K. Armstrong, *The Bible. The Biography* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007).

6 Biblical authors themselves felt free to revise the texts they had inherited and give them an entirely different meaning, and later exegetes regularly held up the Bible as a template for the problems of their own time, feeling quite free to adapt it and make it speak to contemporary conditions.²

In a word, biblical history has always been re-written, the Bible has never had one single message, and there has probably never been any one interpretation of anything in scripture.

The other book, *Reading the Bible with Giants*,³ by David Paul Harris (Fuller Theological Seminary, Colorado Springs), is aimed more at students and serious Bible readers and tackles similar issues to demonstrate how 2000 years of biblical interpretation can shed new light on old texts. Harris encourages us to recognise and practice different levels of reading (devotional, literary, and the nuts and bolts of scholarship) and he argues that we need to understand what has gone before, not simply for its own sake but also in order to evaluate what is currently being offered.

Both Armstrong and Harris nudged me to take a fresh look at the evidence, partly to examine Armstrong's conclusions, partly to fill out Parris's point about learning from the past, and partly to encourage readers today (especially students and preachers) to be more (not less) adventurous in their presentations, but always to be equally diligent in checking their work with others in the light of what has gone before.

Overall, I noted two things not to be forgotten. One, that though the texts of the Bible go back at least 2,500 years the formation and recognition of the Bible as we know it (the Canon), for both Jews and Christians, is no older than the fourth century. Until then, though the text was fairly settled, the interpretations of any particular passages varied considerably from Rabbi to Rabbi and from Father to Father.

The other point is that biblical exegesis did not begin with historical criticism, nor will it end with our own theological teachers. It didn't even begin with the early Church, because the early Christian writers grew up in and inherited Jewish hermeneutics and were often keen to demonstrate the similarities and differences between Old and New Testaments. But no more did it begin with the Jews.

² Ibid., pp. 3-5.

³ D.P. Harris, *Reading the Bible with Giants* (London: Paternoster Press, London, 2006).

Nicolas Wyatt, for example, in a recent paper,⁴ shows how work done at Ugarit (c 1000-1250 BCE) supplies evidence that methods of Jewish interpretation (intertextuality is the one he specifically mentions) were standard practice across the whole of the Ancient Near East. But we begin with the Jews.

Jewish Readings

The key word here is Midrash (from the root *darash*, meaning ‘to seek’). Seeking suggests searching, and searching always holds out the possibility of finding something new. Since no two people are likely to find exactly the same thing, and since conditions and circumstances vary from place to place, the door was wide open for varieties of interpretation from the very beginning.

For example, take that familiar text from Hosea, ‘I desire *hesed* and not sacrifice’ (6:6). *Hesed* is a slippery word⁵ because it can have many meanings and translations, ‘mercy’ or ‘steadfast love’ being the most common. Taken simply as ‘mercy’ or ‘love’ it has of course provided an ideal jumping off ground for sermons by preachers who want to stress the importance of humanitarianism over against ritualism, and that interpretation has its own history in Judaism.

Armstrong⁶ tells of two rabbis who met beside the ruins of the temple shortly after its destruction in 70 CE. One of them expressed horror at the destruction and said how could the Jews in future expect to atone for their sins if they could no longer carry out the temple rituals, to which the other replied by quoting Hosea: ‘I desire love and not sacrifice’. Atonement will come from loving deeds, which could now be performed by everybody and not just by the priests. Had he thought more carefully about the original text in context he might have seen that however you translate the word (love or loyalty) God is not so much telling them to love one another as telling them that he wants their love and that he prefers their love to their rituals.

⁴ “Supposing Him to be the Gardener” (John 20: 15): A Study of the Paradise Motif in John’, in ZNW 25 (1990), pp. 21-38, and in *There’s Such Divinity Doth Hedge a King: Selected Essays of Nicolas Wyatt on Royal Ideology in Ugaritic and Old Testament Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), Chapter 7. He also shows how Ugaritic scholarship can sometimes help to elucidate obscurities in Jewish and Christian writings and even correct misconceptions, citing in particular the crib (Luke 2: 7, 12, 16), the virgin (Isaiah 7:14) and the gardener (John 20: 15).

⁵ Variations include ‘mercy’ (AV), ‘steadfast love’ (RSV, NRSV), and ‘loyalty’ (NEB, REB), with ‘loyalty’ as the preferred reading for this particular text according to BDB.

⁶ Armstrong, *The Bible. The Biography*, pp. 83-4.

Never mind the exegesis, its accuracy, or even its authenticity. The story is important for other reasons. It is a pertinent reminder that nobody knows for sure exactly what Hosea said, much less what he intended to say, much less what God really wanted. All we know is what the text which has come down to us appears to say. To some extent of course that rabbi was misquoting Hosea and saying something different. But apparently it was not of importance to him. He knew the text, knew it could offer comfort in his situation and no doubt spotted a new way of looking at the familiar. For the Jews, meaning and interpretation took precedence over the original meaning of the text or the intention of the author, even if anyone knew what they were, as each generation took something from a previous generation and put its own stamp upon it.

Intertextuality

A second feature of Jewish interpretation, also practised by the early Church Fathers and finding something of a comeback these days, is intertextuality — the bringing together of texts from different parts of the scripture because they use the same words or phrases, have similar content or relate to a similar situation.

Bruce Fisk,⁷ in a careful study, points out that secondary biblical episodes were frequently written into the primary narrative to engage in biblical exegesis with the result that elements and themes in the principal story exerted leverage on the secondary, but at the same time the secondary sources themselves were influenced by their new positioning, so that exegesis moved ‘backward’ as well as ‘forward’. He gives several examples.

Pseudo-Philo,⁸ for instance, gets mileage by bringing together two references, one to the Nile in Exodus 1-2 (where Moses is rescued but the offspring of the Israelites are drowned) and the other to the Red Sea in Exodus 14 (where the Children of Israel are rescued and the Egyptians are drowned) thereby offering a re-written account and turning it into a story of crime and punishment.

He does much the same with Exodus 32 and 34 to arrive at a Moses whose face was so transfigured that the Israelites failed to recognise him

⁷ Fisk B., ‘One Good Story Deserves Another: The Hermeneutics of involving Secondary Biblical Episodes in the Narratives of *Pseudo-Philo* and *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*’, in Craig A. Evans (ed), *Interpretation of Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark (Continuum), 2004), pp. 221-9.

⁸ Fisk, *Book of Biblical Antiquities*, a Jewish pseudepigraphical work transmitted along with Latin translations of Philo (hence the title) but obviously not written by him.

and then links that with the brothers of Joseph who failed to recognise him (Genesis 42: 8) to make the point that they, like the Israelites years later, were blinded by their sinfulness.

After other examples⁹ Fisk concludes that such links and connections could be explicit, more subtle, or simply allusive. They may strike us as sensible, creative or contrived. But they attest to early patterns of reading scripture marked by a high degree of respect for the story and by an intense concern to fill the gaps and resolve difficulties.¹⁰

Rabbis apparently did this all the time, almost on the principle that ‘one good story deserves another . . .’,¹¹ but mainly to demonstrate the connection between Torah, Prophets and Writings. New Testament writers did something very similar when referring to the Old Testament, a practice favoured by those who wanted to establish the connection and rejected or used differently by those who did not.

Early Christian writers used intertextuality in a variety of ways, sometimes using one text or passage to reinforce another, sometimes to counter the other, sometimes deliberately, sometimes incidentally, and sometimes simply to come up with a different meaning altogether.

The Epistle of *Barnabas*, an early Christian midrash, provides a good example.¹² At one point (11: 2-3),¹³ after a dramatic imperative opening, reminiscent of Isaiah (1:20) and Micah (1:2), *Barnabas* seems to make a fairly innocuous citation of two verses from Jeremiah (2: 12-13) followed by two from Isaiah (16: 1-2) but the result is much more than a simple citation. What *Barnabas* is after is going for the Jews who are refusing baptism and, by skilfully excluding parts of some verses and modifying some of the words in others, *Barnabas* finishes up with a defence of baptism which is what he wanted, giving us a coherent unit with clear ideas, but quite remote from the sources he is using to back it up. The words of scripture are there all right, but his argument depends entirely on

⁹ Fisk, From *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* these include the Rape of Dinah (Genesis 34) with Genesis 20 and 26 in *Testament of Levi* 6: 8 and Joseph’s experience in Potiphar’s house (Genesis 39) with Daniel and his three friends (Daniel 1: 8-16) in *Testament of Joseph* 3:4, together with embellished narratives, ethical appeals and apocalyptic expectations which have much to teach us about the Second Temple period and may also provide valuable evidence of early biblical exegesis.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 238.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 217-38.

¹² See Yaron Z. Eliav, “Interpretative Citation” in the Epistle of *Barnabas* and the Early Christian Attitude Towards the Temple Mount’, in Evans, (ed), *Interpretation of Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity*, pp. 353-362.

¹³ ‘For the prophet saith; Be astonished, O heaven, and let the earth shudder the more at this, for this people hath done two evil things; they abandoned Me the fountain of life, and they digged for themselves a pit of death. Is My holy mountain of Sinai a desert rock? For ye shall be as the fledglings of a bird, which flutter aloft when deprived of their nest.’ (*Barnabas* 11: 2-3).

the way the interpreter shapes the verses. Hermeneutics of that kind have a very long history and are still quite prolific.

After looking at several examples, I identified at least three driving forces behind intertextuality. One is to bolster or demolish an interpretation, sometimes deliberate, sometimes unintentional. A second is to see how each text can contribute something to the other and possibly arrive at an entirely new meaning. A third is just to see what happens, and in its most recent manifestation this may well include bringing together not only texts from scripture but familiar lines, stories and anecdotes from secular literature which can very often enrich the meaning of both.

From the Church Fathers to the Middle Ages

From the second to the fourth centuries, the dominant hermeneutic was a mixture of Typology and Allegory, with little change up to the Middle Ages, when it became more sophisticated, and continued until the Reformation. All we can do is to pick out a few examples.

Typology provided the key for interpreting the Old Testament in the light of Jesus, finding continuity in God's plan, with the Old Testament as little more than a prefiguration of what God would do in the New and a validation of it. Only when the Early Church Fathers shared a common concern to see continuity in God's plan and to unite Old Testament and New Testament, the usage varied, with Barnabas, Justin and Melito using it to counter the Jews who rejected the New Testament and Irenaeus using it to counter the Gnostics who rejected the Old Testament.¹⁴

Briefly, typology begins with the Old Testament as the type; the New Testament is the anti-type. This is then reflected in countless instances. In Irenaeus, Adam is the type, Jesus is the anti-type; similarly Eve and Mary. In Tertullian, Eve (born of the sleeping Adam) becomes a type of the church (born of Jesus Christ while he 'slept' on the cross). The drowning of Pharaoh in the Red Sea (Exodus 14) is a type of baptism in which the Christian is freed and the devil destroyed, and that is reflected from the fourth century in various baptismal formulae and was actually still included in the Roman Catholic Lectionary for the Easter Vigil as recently as 1969.¹⁵

¹⁴ R. J. Coggins and J L Houlden (eds), *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 1990), pp. 713-14.

¹⁵ For similar examples of Mosaic Typology, with Jesus and Peter typed with Moses and Aaron, see Benedict T. Viviano, 'Peter as Jesus' Mouth: Matthew 16: 13-20 in the Light of Exodus 4: 10-17 and Other Models' in Evans, *Interpretation of Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity*, pp. 312-41. Viviano (p. 318) quotes six devices used in constructing typology (explicit statement, implicit

Allegory has been defined as treating the text with less (or more) than a straightforward meaning¹⁶ or, to put it another way, ‘speaking one thing and signifying something other than what is said’ (Heraclites). To understand it we have to distinguish an obvious ‘surface’ or ‘literal’ meaning from a ‘deeper’ or ‘hidden’ meaning; and the best way to understand it is to realise that words, sentences and stories are always capable of more than one interpretation and at a secondary, deeper or allegorical level mean something very different from the literal.¹⁷

In the early church there were two camps. Antioch on the whole stuck with the literal. Alexandria, on the other hand, was the home of the allegorical and Origen one of its principle exponents. For Origen the purpose of reading scripture was to encounter the Logos and therefore the contents of scripture were ‘outward forms of certain mysteries’ and ‘images of divine things’.¹⁸

One of the more familiar and accessible examples is Augustine’s treatment of Noah’s Ark¹⁹ at the beginning of the fifth century. According to Augustine the ark is a figure of the church, rescued by the wood on which Jesus was crucified. Its dimension (300x50x30 length, breadth and height) is in direct proportion to the human body lying face down (length is six times breadth and ten times its thickness) representing his human body. The door signifies the wound in his side by which people enter and the flood which flows are the sacraments by which those who enter are initiated. The square timbers signify the immovable steadiness of the lives of the saints because however you turn a cube it still stands, and other peculiarities of the construction are similarly identified as features of the church.

Parris,²⁰ who uses that example, agrees that nobody today would want to interpret that passage in that way, but we have to remember that Augustine was working within the rules and traditions of his time. He

borrowing, reminiscent circumstances, keywords or phrases, structural imitation and resonant syllabic and/or word patterns), followed by six guidelines (chronological priority of type to anti-type, the type must be known to the author of the anti-type, and in the absence of any explicit statement there should be a combination of the other devices: well-known, not obscure; multiple use of a type strengthens the case; and unusual imagery and uncommon motifs present in both type and anti-type increase the probability of the argument (Dale C. Allison, *The New Moses: a Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 19-23, 140).

¹⁶ Coggins and Houlden, *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 12-16.

¹⁷ D.P. Parris, in Coggins and Houlden, *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 74-80.

¹⁸ Origen, *On First Principles*, Preface, para 8. Butterworth translation. Quoted in Armstrong, *The Bible. The Biography*, p. 111.

¹⁹ See the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, on the web. For a fuller treatment see Parris, in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 75-6.

²⁰ Ibid.

believed a text had four levels of meaning: literal, allegorical (signifying the faith the church had to teach), moral (Christian responsibility) and anagogical meaning (signifying the future and hope).

From the end of the Patristic era (c 600 CE) to the Reformation, variations were minor, mainly the result of changing spiritual demands, the arrival of more advanced information, and a gradual move from hermeneutics dominated by patristic authority to more institutional concerns.²¹ Two watersheds, however, are worth noting.

One was Augustine's principle that at every level the meaning 'perceived by the readers' should be in agreement with the 'rule of faith'. No interpretation should be contrary to the teachings of the church that had been handed down²² and, despite many modifications of interpretation, that principle remained firm and was one of the factors which sparked off the Reformation when Luther said he wanted a faith founded on scripture and not on interpretations of scripture in the light of church tradition.

The other watershed was in the Middle Ages, due mainly to the arrival of cathedral schools and universities. That led to a resurgence of literal interpretations over against allegorical and spiritual interpretations, leading to a demand for tools for a new kind of exegesis and standard textbooks. That, in turn, led to the growth of specialisation as scripture became increasingly important for doctrine, and exegesis became a sub-discipline of theology.

To appreciate the changes in method and emphasis it is worth taking a brief look at the *Song of Songs*²³ as interpreted by Origen in the third century and Bernard of Clairvaux in the eleventh.

Third century Christians mostly took *Song of Songs* simply as a love poem, but for those in Alexandria with an allegorical eye there had to be a deeper meaning. Ostensibly about earthy love it was really about a God of love and the journey from one to the other, and Origen saw it on three levels. Verse 1 ('let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth') may be taken literally. It is a wedding poem. The bride is at the church waiting for the groom, as in pre-Christian times Israel was waiting for the incarnation. We then move to the allegorical level. For 'bride and bridegroom' now read 'Christ and his church' and relate it to Paul's comments on relationships between husband, wife and church in Ephesians (5: 23-32). Finally, apply it to the individual who has many fine and attractive qualities

²¹ Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), pp. 305-24 (History of Interpretation).

²² Parris, in Coggins and Houlden, *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 76.

²³ Armstrong, *The Bible. The Biography*, pp. 114-15.

but ‘whose only desire is to be united to the Word of God’,²⁴ and that awaits the enlightenment and illumination that comes through her union with her husband. Thus the bride becomes a model for all Christians who must train themselves to make the same journey.

Now notice the increasing sophistication when we come to Bernard of Clairvaux, who over twenty years preached 86 sermons to his fellow-monks on this book alone. Like Origen, Bernard’s exegesis and spirituality are based on the love of God, and as with Origen we make the same journey (from human love to the love of God) but now in three stages. Here, the phrase ‘the king has brought me into his chambers’,²⁵ refers to the senses of scripture, of which there are three: the garden, (representing the literal), the storeroom (representing the moral) and the bedchamber (representing the mystery of contemplation). We begin in the garden with the text, explore the storerooms to discover how we ought to live and then lose ourselves and our self-interest in the bedroom. And the bride looking for the bridegroom ‘by night’ suggests modesty, expressed in private acts of charity and a lack of ostentation.²⁶ The Bible was a mystery. Bible study was a personal and spiritual discipline, and the vision of God was to be identified with the mystery of the bedroom.

The Reformation and Beyond

Once we get to the Reformation the emphasis changes again. The crucial questions emerging were what happened, what are we to believe, what are we to do and where are we going, and that you find exemplified to some extent in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556).

The literal meaning was still important but it was not the whole story. Ignatius wanted to free scripture from the confines of its original content to become a vehicle for the word of Christ to the contemporary church, using the scriptures to express and understand the mystery of Christ within the developing structure of the church, but the problems of an increasingly fractured church made it difficult, and even before the Reformation there were growing differences of opinion as to what was, and what was not, acceptable.²⁷ The battle lines were being drawn up with the rebels against Roman Catholic authority becoming more interested in

²⁴ R.P. Lawson, (trans), *Origen, The Song of Songs, Commentary and Homilies* (New York, 1956), pp. 60-61.

²⁵ Irene M. Edmonds and Killian Walsh (trans), *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux: On the Song of Songs*, vol 2, p. 28.

²⁶ Armstrong, *The Bible. The Biography*, pp. 138-39.

²⁷ Andrew Louth, ‘Allegorical Interpretation’ in Coggins and Houlden, *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 12-14.

exegesis that provided biblical support for Protestant positions, and the Roman Catholic Church responding with highly spiritual commentaries and exegetical works, some leading to a call for spiritual reform within the Roman Church itself.²⁸

As for exegesis, the Reformation had little to offer. Calvin wrote his commentaries, Luther his expositions. The Psalms and Paul were particularly popular. Biblical studies developed linguistic and philological studies but for the most part all ecclesiastics were too busy quarrying the Bible for those texts which suited their purposes to worry their heads with allegorical explanations, whilst the Enlightenment and Romanticism which followed left scant room for most of what had gone before.

So the next change came with the rise of archaeological, scientific and historical criticism leading to what became known as ‘modern scholarship’, and that took precedence until the end of the twentieth century, when biblical scholars outside the church tradition began to distinguish academia from ecclesiasticism and, in a kind of Second Reformation, people in all traditions began to read the scriptures for themselves and to make their own assessments, judgements and interpretations.

What we notice however is that much of what today we regard as new (feminist readings, liberation readings, ecological readings and so on) and what some people find worrying, may be different in content but is not all that different in method from what has always been the case, and one way of getting into that is to take specific texts or passages and trace the way in which they have been handled over the years.²⁹ I leave you to compile your own lists. Mine would certainly include Genesis 1-11 and Revelation, the Nativity and Resurrection narratives, one of Paul’s letters (not necessarily Romans) and a prophet.

Hans Robert Jauss speaks of ‘summit dialogues’³⁰ — definitive readings of stories or passages which almost universally have been read and taught in the same way, over long periods, throughout the whole of Christendom, possibly the result of a startling point made by a particular

²⁸ Jerry H. Bentley, ‘History of Interpretation’ in Metzger and Coogan, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, pp. 315-18.

²⁹ See for example a hitherto unpublished paper by Andrew Mein (Westcott House, Cambridge) on the different interpretations of Ezekiel 16 (Ezekiel’s portrayal of women) in Origen and Jerome (where the emphasis is on heresy and asceticism), in Calvin (where the issue is idolatry and social control) and in William Greenhill, a seventeenth century Puritan divine in the days of the Civil War (where it is a matter of revolutionary politics and Puritan values).

³⁰ Hans Robert Jauss, quoted in Parris, in Coggins and Houlden, *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 202.

commentator, due perhaps to the sharpness of his insight or intellect or (more likely) the particular position which he holds in the church or the academy, and which the church is therefore happy to accept as the norm.

Let me give you three examples: a simple gospel story, a foundational document and a relatively recent but well-established critique.

First, the gospel story. The Epileptic Boy³¹ (Matthew 17: 14-21). What was this boy's affliction?

The Greek word (*selhniazomai*) means 'to be moonstruck', hence 'lunatic' in the Authorised Version (1611) but subsequently mostly as 'epileptic'. The early church seemed undecided between lunatic and demon possession, with a third group seeing it as an illness (epilepsy) brought on by the influence of the moon — a view possibly reflecting rabbinical teaching that a child conceived under the light of the moon would be an epileptic.

Origen, in the third century, coming from a Jewish and Palestinian background, followed by Chrysostom in the fourth, settled for demon possession, not caused by the moon but by an evil spirit who observed the phases of the moon and misled people into relating cause and effect, a view that held sway until the Reformation. Others, under the influence of Greek and Roman culture, and physicians such as Galen (early third century) and Hippocrates (fifth century), who taught that the moon had a profound effect on our brain, settled for epilepsy, Galen in particular noting that epilepsy was weakest at half moon and strongest at full moon.

By the Reformation, the views of Galen and Hippocrates were more generally accepted and there was a swing back to the view that epilepsy was closely related to the phases of the moon. So we find Calvin rejecting demon possession (Origen and Chrysostom) in favour of the contemporary medical opinion and writing,

Lunatics . . . is the name given to those, in whom the strength of the disease increases or diminishes, according to the waxing or waning of the moon, such as those who are afflicted with epilepsy, or similar diseases.³²

Here again, for our purposes, the pros and cons of the argument are secondary. The thing to note is that Origen read the story with theological spectacles. Calvin read it through the lens of mediaeval science. Commentators today read it in the light of contemporary medicine.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Calvin commenting on Matthew 4: 18-25, quoted in Parris, *ibid.*, p. 206.

Hermeneutics is a reflection of who we are, where we are, what issues happen to be biting at the time and how much of our general culture we take for granted.

Secondly, Caesarea Philippi ('You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it'. Matthew 16:13-20), a foundational document for the Roman Catholic Church, heavily interpreted in a certain way, with all kinds of ramifications for church teaching and doctrine. Few Catholics question it, many have an investment in keeping it under wraps, and most Protestants scarcely get beyond wondering how anyone with Peter's impetuosity could ever be described as 'a rock'.

According to Benedict Viviano³³ the church has lived with three basic interpretations of this text.

The oldest patristic interpretation (the Eastern position), which sees Peter as exemplary for all Christian believers, with his confession of faith as the foundation rock.

The Augustinian, which sees Christ as the foundation rock.

The Roman which sees Peter, the apostle, as the foundation rock.

In this hermeneutical maelstrom ecclesiastics, biblical scholars and historians have each developed their own *modus operandi*. Ecclesiastics have wrestled with two basic questions. One, does it apply only to Peter or to his successors in some form of Petrine ministry? Two, if it does, is it legitimate to apply this to the succession of bishops in the Roman see?

Biblical scholars over the centuries have come at it rather differently. Some of it has been pure speculation asking, for example, what Matthew, writing 20-30 years after the death of Paul, Peter and James, might have had in mind. Some, especially the later ones, try to harmonise these verses with other New Testament passages, such as 1 Corinthians 3:10-11 (where the only foundation is Christ) and Ephesians 2:20 (where the foundation is the apostles and prophets with Christ as the cornerstone), and Cyprian (Bishop of Carthage and martyred in the third century) rejected any kind of

³³ In an essay on Mosaic typology, written to draw attention to an unnoticed Mosaic parallel in this text, Viviano offers his own exegesis and summarises the ecumenical implications that arise from the way it has been interpreted over the years. ('Peter as Jesus' Mouth: Matthew 16:13-20 in the Light of Exodus 4:10-17 and Other Models', in Evans, *Interpretation of Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity*, pp. 312-41). He accepts the two-source hypothesis for Matthew, dates the gospel c80-90 CE, produced in Northern Palestine by a moderate Jewish Christian in polemical dialogue with the Judaism of Jamnia and the Pauline inheritance, who sees the church as the true Israel, the legitimate successor to the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint and committed to finding accredited leadership for the church with Jesus as Messiah.

authority or primacy for the Church of Rome yet was honoured by Rome as a saint.

Ulrich Luz,³⁴ in his commentary on Matthew, gives a brief history of interpretation in which he points out that the idea of a teaching office embodied in a single person (Peter), with or without successors, is no older than Jerome (fourth century) or Leo (fifth century), nor is there any evidence that Matthew had any thought of Rome or that he envisaged a Petrine officer, or that the historical development of the see of Rome had any initial link with these verses.

Twentieth century biblical scholars came up with a different approach altogether. T.W. Manson,³⁵ for example, isolates two questions. One, is it part of the original text of Matthew? Probably yes, says Manson; there is no reason to question it and he dismisses the argument from silence in the first 400 years on the grounds that there was no occasion to mention it. Two, if it is original to the gospel, is it a genuine saying of Jesus? Manson thinks probably not, on the grounds that references to the church in the gospels are rare and suspect; the emphasis there is more on the coming of the kingdom than the maintenance of an institution, and the text seems to reflect a larger ‘church body’ made up of smaller communities, more like Acts than the gospels. He thinks it is much more likely to have been of Palestinian origin, possibly in Corinth where Paul was defending his position, and became part of the Christian-Jewish tradition which Matthew or a subsequent redactor incorporated into the text.

Clearly, by this stage, hermeneutics vary depending on whether your primary commitment is to the text or to the church.

Thirdly, from a straightforward story and a foundational document, we turn to a recent, though by now well-established traditional interpretation of the Great Commission ('Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. Matthew 28: 19) and Paul's Missionary Journeys (Acts 13-14; 15:40-18: 22; 18:22-21:16). Sometimes a fresh reading challenges what we liked to think of as the fruit of our scientific objectivity.

D.P. Parris³⁶ notes that this text stands in the middle ground, neither ‘open’ (that is to say, capable of multiple interpretations, like a psalm) nor ‘closed’ (where there can be no doubt what is intended) and proceeds to a potted history of how the church has interpreted it over the years.

³⁴ U. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 1/2; (Benziger, Zurich, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990), pp. 450-52.

³⁵ T.W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1949), pp. 201-5.

³⁶ Parris, in Coggins and Houlden, *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 12-46.

For the first few hundred years the church saw it as a command to the apostles and their successors to engage in baptism, teaching and membership and nothing much changed prior to the Reformation. The command was always regarded as binding on the church and the only change was that the baptismal clause and the Trinitarian formula assumed a new importance.

By the time you get to the Reformation the Roman Catholic Church was claiming that this commission could only be carried out by the Roman Church because they were the only church established by Jesus Christ, and Protestants, struggling for survival, had little enthusiasm either for the debate or for long distance missionary endeavour. Luther, following Eusebius and Athanasius, took the view that this was a charge given to the apostles, urged Christian rulers to stem the flow of Islam but otherwise had nothing to say on the subject. Calvin similarly worked over familiar territory and took refuge in a plea for the expansion of the kingdom of God.

Menno Simons and the Anabaptists were the only ones to see it as a commission to preach the gospel to the whole world and as a responsibility placed on all believers, possibly because they were deeply conscious of the corruption of the Dark Ages, looked back with nostalgia to the golden age under Constantine, and felt an urge to recreate the church of early apostolic times.

What brought this text alive was the birth of the modern missionary movement 200 years later and even then it still took Protestantism another hundred years before the seeds of Calvinism blossomed in the New World with people like Jonathan Edwards and the growth of Pietism, William Carey's *Enquiry*,³⁷ and the foundation of the Baptist Missionary Society (1792) followed by several others, ushering in a new era with a call for fresh missionary endeavour.

With hindsight it is obviously a case of biblical exegesis following ecclesiasticism rather than scripture reshaping the church, but now quite recently we have scholars, particularly of Asian origin such as R.S. Sugirtharajah,³⁸ arguing that this is a case of biblical exegesis following ecclesiasticism following culture.

Revisiting Matthew 28:19, Sugirtharajah points out how, for 200 years, popular exegesis of this text (along with descriptions of Paul's

³⁷ *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen* (1792), with a facsimile reproduction by the Baptist Missionary Society, 1934.

³⁸ 'A Postcolonial Exploration of Collusion and Construction in Biblical Interpretation', in R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations. An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2003).

travels as ‘missionary journeys’) are the direct product of Western colonial expansion heavily involved with Western mercantile companies — not *post hoc*, but *propter*. Both the idea and the language reflect a collusion between colonialism and exegesis. Others may prefer to call it contextual theology backed by contemporary exegesis.

The strengths and weaknesses of Sugirtharajah’s arguments³⁹ may be left to others but there can be no doubt that once seen this way many people will find it difficult to see Matthew 28:19 any other, which brings me to my conclusion.

Conclusion

Instead of finalising any meaning or restricting any interpretation to a given context Sugirtharajah prefers to think of narratives as ‘exiles’, always on the move and so able to move from one context to another.⁴⁰

Compare this with a quote from Brueggemann which brings us back to where we began with Jewish hermeneutics and the rabbis. Drawing on two Jewish scholars, Susan Handelman⁴¹ and Moshe Idel,⁴² Brueggemann⁴³ writes,

Jewish interpretation does not seek to give closure to texts but can permit many readings to stand side by side . . . a Jewish affirmation that the voice of the text is variously heard and is not limited by authorial intent, adding,

it is unhelpful for the text interpreter, and therefore the preacher, to give heavy closure to texts because such a habit does a disservice to text and to listener, both of which are evokers and practitioners of multiple readings.⁴⁴

³⁹ In the case of the Great Commission he notes that it came at a time when those who were engaged in mission based their work on other texts, when Danish clergy and other reformers, including followers of both Calvin and Luther, questioned the need for it, and when many reformers and ecclesiastical thinkers took the view that the commission applied only to the apostles and the charge lost its force with their death. In the case of Paul’s ‘missionary tours’ (so-called) he argues that such a description is entirely a product of the colonial era. The idea never appears in the early church or the reformers and can surely never be given much credibility when none of the early church fathers mentions it and Erasmus, Calvin and Beza all seem to have missed it. As to why this emphasis appeared when it did he is in no doubt that commentators were swayed by the momentous territorial changes taking place at the time and were reading these events back into apostolic times. (*Ibid.*, pp. 23-4.)

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p 69.

⁴¹ S. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982).

⁴² M. Idel, ‘Infinities of Torah in Kabbalah’, in Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (eds), *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

⁴³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Word Militant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), p. 23.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Once you enshrine an interpretation in stone, he argues, you make it difficult for anyone to see it differently.

I began with biblical hermeneutics in the Ancient Near East. I conclude with an illustration of Brueggemann's point from classical Greece.

We are all familiar with the Oedipus myth, thanks not so much to Sophocles as to Freud, who made it the lynchpin of his theory of infant sexuality, based on an impulse to reject the father and fall in love with the mother. Today we are more aware of the theory than the myth, so that whereas originally the theory arose from the myth the myth has now become the validation of the theory.

But then, last year, along comes Sally Vickers with a book,⁴⁵ offering a re-reading of Oedipus questioning the use Freud made of it and suggesting that the myth has another and quite different message.

For Freud the offence of the Thebans was their lifestyle — a violation of taboos with incest and infanticide top of the list. Vickers sees it very differently. She sees the offence as an unwillingness to engage in 'human relationships, with knowing' and Oedipus is the one person with the moral courage to abandon his cover, decipher the deep riddle of his own birth and history, and face who he is, in a world where most people can't. But as she says, she has little hope of ever getting this view of Oedipus across because since Freud's 're-telling' nobody ever really hears the story.

So it is with all new readings, re-readings and fresh interpretations of biblical material. Interesting, yes, but never easy to accept when at least for a hundred years, to go back no further, too many people have succeeded in turning the liveliness of Lot's wife into a pillar of salt.

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⁴⁵ S. Vickers, 'Blind to the Truth', in *The Guardian*, 15th December 2007, Review Section, p. 22, introducing her book, *Where Three Roads Meet: The Myth of Oedipus* (Canongate Myths) (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2007).

Which future Church (form)?

A plea for a ‘Believers Church’ ecclesiology¹

Teun van der Leer

Ecclesiology is a recent and remarkable element of systematic theology. The term as such dates from the latter part of the seventeenth century and has only consistently been used as a specialist term since 1945.² For a long time the Church was an empiric ‘given’. There was no reflection about this, yet in the Church faith was received, kept and passed on.

We do come across the Church in early Christian baptismal and confessions, as in Hippolytus’ Apostolic Tradition in 215,³ in the Apostles’ Confession of Faith⁴ and in the confessions of faith of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381).⁵ The Church is constantly mentioned in the third question on baptism and in the third part of the confirmation, so always in relation to the Holy Spirit. This last fact seems important to me, as ecclesiology is special in that it conveys an opinion about a reality concerning ourselves, with all its consequent shortcomings. Regarding God, Christ and the Holy Spirit we are able to express ourselves in the most beautiful and most elevated style of language. But if we do so in relation to the Church it inevitably brings embarrassment. The church has not yet developed into what it should be. It is only possible to speak about it with eschatological reservation. At the same time the Church is the most tangible part of professing faith. Whereas we know the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit from ‘hearsay’, the Church is visible and tangible; *we ourselves are the Church*. This makes thinking about the Church exciting and adventurous.

¹ I have chosen to write *Believers Church* and not *Believers’ Church* (with an apostrophe). This might suggest – wrongly – that the church is owned by the believers. A *Believers Church* too is and remains a church of Christ.

² Michael Beintker, art. *Ekklesiologie*, RGG⁴ Bd. 2 col. 1183. Vgl. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition 5: Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture (since 1700)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 282: ‘As the twentieth century began, each of the major churches of a divided Christendom was obliged, for reasons of its own, to address anew the doctrine of the church’. According to Pelikan it is not earlier than in the twentieth century that ecclesiology becomes mature (p. 289).

³ The third baptismal question here runs: *Credis in Spiritu sancto et sanctam ecclesiam?*

⁴ Here in one breath with ‘the communion of the saints’.

⁵ *Ecclesia una, sancta, catholica, et apostolica*. Cf. J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1960, ³1976), p. 296-331, and Nicholas Lossky (ed.), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC-Publications, 1991), p. 727-728.

Believers Church Tradition

In this article I would like to make a case for a ‘Believers Church’ ecclesiology. First, I will describe its background and characteristics. Secondly, I will try to define it further theologically and I will apply it to baptism and ministry by way of asking questions. Finally I will indicate in which direction more thinking on the subject could take place.

A ‘Believers Church’ ecclesiology is one that focuses, not primarily on ministry and the sacrament or on Word and sacrament, but on the congregation as a community of believers as the supreme authority. I label this a ‘bottom up’ ecclesiology. Without believers, no congregation: ‘*We are the Church*’.⁶

This so-called third ‘type’, called ‘sect’ by Troeltsch,⁷ ‘pentecostal’ by Newbigin,⁸ and ‘baptist’ (with a small ‘b’) by McClendon,⁹ has been lumped together in the term *Believers Church* since the 1950s. The term as such dates back to *Der protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* by Max Weber who, in 1904, introduced this (English) term with the words ‘eine Gemeinschaft der persönlich Gläubigen und Wiedergeboreren rund nur dieser’.¹⁰ Only in 1955 did the *General Conference of the Mennonite Church* pick up the term and devote a congress to it in Chicago.¹¹

⁶ The title of a paragraph in Miroslav Wolf’s study on the church: *After Our Likeness. The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 135vv. In this book he brings the theology of the First Baptist, John Smyth, in dialogue with the Roman-Catholic Ratzinger and the Eastern-Orthodox Zizioulas. See also René Erwisch, ‘Ecclesiologie van de participatie: de ecclesiologie van Miroslav Wolf’, *Soteria* 22.4 (2005) pp. 8-16.

⁷ In 1912 he wrote his *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* with the famous sociological threefold church-sect-mysticism, in which he defines sect with these words: ‘Verhältnismässig kleine Gruppen, erstreben eine persönlich-innerliche Durchbildung und eine persönlich-unmittelbare Verknüpfung der Glieder ihres Kreises, verhalten sich gegen Welt, Staat, Gesellschaft indifferent, duldet oder feindlich’. Quotation taken from ‘Gesammelte Schriften’, Band 1 (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1922, ³1977), p. 362. Robert Friedman says about this: ‘It was a great step forward when Ernst Troeltsch first so clearly distinguished church and sect – although primarily from a sociological point of view. Church is the institution of salvation for all baptized members; sect is the brotherhood of the regenerate, the congregation of saints, a gathered church of true Christians either for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper alone or for a collective life according to the Sermon on the Mount’, in: *Hutterite Studies* (Goshen, Indiana: Mennonite Press, 1961), p. 6.

⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1953).

⁹ James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Ethics* (1986, ²2002), *Doctrine* (1994) and *Witness* (2000) (Nashville: Abingdon Press). See especially the first chapter of *Ethics*. For a summary of his ecclesiology, see René Erwisch, *De ecclesiologie van James McClendon jr. Baptisten ecclesiologie met een kleine ‘b’*, in: *Soteria* 22.4, dec. 2005, p. 55-64.

¹⁰ The whole book can be found on: <http://141.89.99.185:8080/uni/professuren/e06/a/a/ha/PE.pdf> (Copyright 1999 Institut für Pädagogik der Universität Potsdam / flitner@rz.uni-potsdam.de / Prof. Dr. E. Flitner). Quotation from p. 152 (accessed 12/2/08).

¹¹ *Proceedings of the Study Conference on the Believers’ Church* (Newton: The Mennonite Press, 1955).

Two Dutchmen, J. Oosterbaan and J. Reiling (members of the Mennonite and the Baptist Seminary respectively) concluded, in the ecumenical debate, that the voice of ‘the third type’ was not heard loud enough. According to them the other churches were not to be blamed for it, but the ‘Baptismal’ churches themselves. In the debates they were too often absent. This led, after contact in the United States, especially with Mennonites, Baptists and Disciples,¹² to the first of a series of (to date) sixteen *Conferences on the Concept of the Believers Church* (CCBCs), held in Louisville (VS) in 1967.¹³ So the concept was firmly brought into the limelight. The most recent conference was held at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, sponsored by the Canadian Mennonite University Institute for Theology and the Church from 11th-14th June 2008.¹⁴

It is not difficult to understand that an Anabaptist and a Baptist were the first to promote these contacts: they are members of typical ‘believers churches’. Practically all studies on the *Believers Church* consider the rise of the Anabaptist congregations in Switzerland and Germany in the first part of the sixteenth century as a starting point or as the most important milestone. As to the study of the so-called radical reformation, an enormous development took place in the latter part of the twentieth century.¹⁵ In the wake of it the debate on the *Believers Church* was a logical effect.¹⁶

I believe this debate is still in its infancy and, in our discussion on ‘Emerging Church’, ‘Liquid Church’ and ‘Mission Shaped Church’, it is something of topical interest more than ever before. Yoder remarks: ‘The “concept of the Believers’ Church”, then, is not a mere midpoint on a scale between establishment and chaos, not a *via media* between too much tradition and too little. It is a type *sui generis*, which (...) keeps arising again and again, in every country, taking on similar shapes, *mutatis*

¹² Members of the *Disciples of Christ Church*. Look at www.disciples.org (080714).

¹³ James Leo Garrett, Jr. (ed.), *The Concept of the Believers’ Church: Addresses from the 1967 Louisville Conference* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1969).

¹⁴ An overview in Appendix A in Barry L. Callen, *Radical Christianity. The Believers Church Tradition in Christianity’s History and Future* (Nappanee: Evangel Publishing House 1999), p. 189-192 and on http://www.cmu.ca/church-community/02_BelieversChurchConfPrev.html (080714).

¹⁵ See especially Frank H. Littell, *The Free Church* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1957), Idem, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, second rev. ed. (Boston: Starr King Press, 1958), Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), M.R. Watts, *The Dissenters* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), G.H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962) and John H. Yoder, *Täufertum und Reformation im Gespräch* (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1968).

¹⁶ Other ‘milestones’ that are mentioned in this regard are the Donatists, the Montanists, the Kathars, the Waldensians, the Lollards, the Moravian Brethren and the Hussites. See Donald Durnbaugh, *The Believers’ Church. The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publ., 1968).

mutandis'.¹⁷ Might this ‘third type’ be looked upon as the future church (form)?¹⁸

Characteristics of the Believers Church

What are the characteristics of this type of church? It is self-evident that nowhere has a definitive definition been recorded, but a closer study of the subject shows that a number of essential characteristics turn up regularly. I will mention six of them:

1. It concerns a congregation of reborn believers

In this context ‘Regenerated membership’ is the expression which is used consistently. Believers form the congregation and this comprises only practising believers. It concerns people who ‘mit Ernst Christen sein wollen und das Evangelium mit Hand und Mund bekennen’.¹⁹ Membership of the congregation/church is not simply a derivative of the group to which you belong on the basis of birth or origin, but the result of a deliberate choice.

2. It concerns a congregation that forms a brotherhood

It is a misconception to consider the *Believers Church* as the result of the individualisation of faith and spirituality in (post-)modern times. The choice for Christ is a choice for the brother and brotherhood. It implies care and love for and reconciliation with ‘the brother’. The famous and frequently quoted saying ‘Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them’ is in essence the theme of the ‘unanimous’ prayer for mutual reconciliation. *Christ is where people become reconciled with each other*. According to Matthew 5:23-24 reconciliation even precedes the sacrifice on the altar! He who loves God loves his brother also (1 John 4:21). ‘You are my brother’ is closely intertwined with ‘I am your keeper’.

¹⁷ John H. Yoder, ‘Believers’ Church Conferences and Hubmaier’ in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Jan. 1991, p. 12.

¹⁸ What for Barth in 1947 was still a question: ‘Who knows if not perhaps, when once the territorial churches of the old world have fallen apart, the Congregational church form will also have a future among us?’ (quoted in Littell, *The Anabaptist Concept of the Church* in Hershberger, *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, p. 130), for Yoder it is in 1978 already a fact, according to his opening statement during his lecture at the CBCC in Winnipeg: ‘First, let me affirm: The Church of Tomorrow cannot but be a Believers’ Church’ (Yoder, ‘The Believers’ Church: Global Perspectives’ in J.K. Zeman and W. Klaassen, *The Believers’ Church in Canada: Addresses and Papers from the Study Conference in Winnipeg, May 15-18, 1978*, Mennonite Publ. Service Ontario 1979, p. 3).

¹⁹ Martin Luther in his ‘Vorrede zu: Deutsche Messe und Ordnung Gottesdiensts 1526’, quoted from Karin Bornkamm und Gerhard Ebeling, *Martin Luther Ausgewählte Schriften Funfter Band* (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1983), p. 77.

3. It concerns a congregation of disciples

For *believers churches* faith is not an aim as such, but a means. The keyword is not faith, but imitation. In his famous *Anabaptist Vision*, Bender calls the congregation ‘a covenant of discipleship’, as ‘the true test of the Christian (...) is discipleship’.²⁰ Reciprocal correction and discipline is closely connected to it: ‘Being a disciple is being under discipline’.²¹ Disciples make each other aware of this. This is not a matter of legalism or morals (though in history it frequently resulted in it) but of love and the acceptance of responsibility for one another. As the conclusion of James’ radical letter states, within the congregation it is about stimulating the other to convert and to return (twice *epistrepho!*). His conclusion is both abrupt and promising: this implies saving from death (James 5:19-20).

4. It concerns a congregation of people who are equal and gifted

Practically all *believers churches* have a congregational structure, i.e. no official hierarchy, but an egalitarian community. Everyone is gifted²² and has their share in the service and testimony of Christ. Decisions are taken by common prayer and consultation inspired by the Holy Spirit.

5. It concerns a community in accordance with the new-testimonial model

Presumably the appeal to the New Testament as fundamental norm is the essence of the *Believers Church*. ‘Biblicism’ and ‘primitivism’ are honorary nicknames rather than labels to be ashamed of. When naming ‘Biblicism’ as an essential characteristic, McClendon frankly combines them and states: ‘Understood not as one or another theory of inspiration or inerrancy, but as humble acceptance of the authority of Scripture for both faith and practice. *Related terms are ‘restitution’ and ‘restoration’* (my italics).²³ The latter terms are closely connected with the view that the Church has ‘fallen’ and that renewal or reformation is insufficient; restoration is necessary.²⁴

²⁰ Harold S. Bender, ‘The Anabaptist Vision’ in *Church History* XIII (March 1944), p. 13. In ‘The Anabaptist Theology of Discipleship’ in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* XXIV No. 1, Jan. 1950, he calls discipleship ‘the most characteristic, most central, most essential and regulative concept in Anabaptist thought, which largely determines all else’ (p. 27). In this article Bender also quotes the famous words of Hans Denk: ‘Niemand vermag Christum wahrlich zu erkennen, es sei denn, dass er ihm nachfolge im Leben’ (p. 32). Cf. ‘Denk, Hans (ca. 1500-1527)’ in *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* on www.gameo.org.

²¹ Donald Durnbaugh, *The Believers’ Church*, p. 32.

²² In all three lists of charismata from Paul the ‘to all’ is emphasised and always the giving of the Gifts is directly connected with the service of all. Look resp. to Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-11; 27-31; Eph. 4:11-16.

²³ James McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 27.

²⁴ More about this in Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, p. 46-108.

6. It concerns a missionary congregation

Even more than Matthew 18 ('Where two or three are gathered in my name') Matthew 28 (The Great Commission) can be retraced in the writings of the Anabaptists. They held the view that the gospel had to be preached in combination with an appeal to faith.²⁵ This is contrary to the reformers who still presupposed a baptised and therefore Christian people. The mission movement which they formed – sometimes unwillingly because of persecutions²⁶ – brought thousands to Christ. A baptised person was a witness, just as in Acts often in the literal sense of the word: *martyrus*.²⁷ Baptism by water and baptism by blood sometimes formed a perfect match. Jorg van Passau was baptised by Hut *while* reading aloud the Great Commission.²⁸ Those who were baptised pledged that 'they went freely under the cross (...) and for the Gospel's sake were made pilgrims and martyrs throughout the known world'.²⁹

Pneuma-ecclesiology

The question which arises is whether these characteristics demand fresh attention in the time of a 'Church after Christendom'.³⁰ Though there is no absolute contrast between a 'given church' (the church already 'exists' before you are there) and a 'gathered church' (the church 'comes into being' at the moment that 'two or three' are gathered in the name of Jesus), it is obvious that the latter is much more in keeping with the New Testament and (post-)modern times. But more importantly, it does much more justice to the fact that it is the Holy Spirit that forms and leads the congregation.

At the start of this article I stated that ecclesiology concerns ourselves and that for this reason it is a good thing that we always confess our faith in the Church and our faith in the Holy Spirit together. This Spirit is 'the' promise (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4), the *conditio sine qua non* before a witnessing congregation can be recognised. Woe to those who think they

²⁵ Here also more in Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, p. 109-137.

²⁶ Concerning the 'unwillingly' compare Acts 8:1-4.

²⁷ The synod of Augsburg from 1527, during which the Anabaptists divided the land 'on a grand map of evangelical enterprise', was later called the martyrs' synod, because the majority of the participants died within a few years as martyrs as a consequence of their missionary activities. Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, p. 122; Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church*, p. 72.

²⁸ Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, p. 197, n.18.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 112.

³⁰ The title of a book from Stuart Murray, chairman of the 'UK Anabaptist Network': *Church After Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004). See also his *Post-Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004). By the way, Littell already in 1967 talks about a 'post-Constantinian era', a 'post-Christian age' and a 'post-Christendom thought and style'. See Garrett, (ed.), *The Concept of the Believers' Church*, p. 18 and 24.

can talk about the Church without wholly basing it on the work of the Holy Spirit.³¹ So, if we want to know how the congregation operates, we ought to know how the Holy Spirit ‘operates’. We receive the Spirit as a gift, a present, but we never own him. He is neither available nor manageable and he cannot be manipulated, but we *receive* him. The Spirit is not intended just for some, but for all of us. *All* were filled with the Holy Spirit and the Spirit is visibly active in everybody (1 Cor. 12:7). The Spirit is a first instalment, *arrabon*, a foretaste of what is in store for us.³²

In the sense of ecclesiology this means that the congregation cannot and must never focus on one particular form or shape. It remains aware of its temporary character and its constant dependence on what the Holy Spirit ‘says to the churches’ here and now. What Zeman says about the *believers churches* in fact applies to every congregation: ‘A believers church is only one generation away from extinction. Unless God the Spirit continues His gracious ministry of regeneration, such a church is doomed to death.’³³ Donovan writes that it is not ‘revival or reform of the church’ which is at stake, but ‘the refounding of the Catholic church for our age’. He quotes a young student, who says: ‘In working with young people in America, do not try to call them back to where you were, and do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful as that place might seem to you. *You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before.*’³⁴ Combining Zeman with Donovan it could be claimed that the Holy Spirit creates a new community in every generation. Following Keith Jones, I prefer the label of ‘gathering’ over that of a ‘gathered church’: ‘If we talk about the “gathered” community of believers, there is a sense of finality, completeness about it. (...) So, I have reflected on substituting “gathering” as an active model, suggesting it is not yet complete; others might join; it is in the process of being formed.’³⁵ This process requires a continuous orientation and dependence on the Holy Spirit. We might use the expression *pneuma-ecclesiology* here; a kind of ecclesiology which is consistently built up from pneumatology. In making this statement I am trying to point out that in each generation or even in each period of new developments and challenges it meets, the congregation gathers courage to start anew and to focus once again on the presence of the

³¹ Karl Barth, *Hoofdsom der Heilige Leer: Voordrachten over de Apostolische Geloofsbelijdenis gehouden te Bonn in de zomer van 1946* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1949), p. 216.

³² Three times in the NT the Spirit is called *arrabon*: 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14.

³³ Zeman in: Garrett (ed.), *The Concept of the Believers’ Church*, p. 60.

³⁴ Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered. Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 2003 [1978]), p. xiii.

³⁵ Keith G. Jones, ‘Rethinking Baptist Ecclesiology’ in: *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 1.1 September 2000, p. 8.

Living Lord amidst the congregation. In this respect I refer to what James Dunn writes about the Johannine community:

The Johannine community had no sense of being historically distant from Jesus or of having to live out of the experience of earlier generations as mediated now only through sacrament or office. On the contrary, each generation is as close to Jesus as the first, and religious experience retains its vitality and immediacy because the Spirit is the presence of Jesus.³⁶

I presume that it is exactly the ‘Believers Church Tradition’ that offers good possibilities here, on its own or combined with and/or as a supplement to a more catholic or more reformed ecclesiology. Nigel Wright claims that the health and the future of the church is to be found in *interaction* and *interpenetration* (my italics) of what he calls ‘catholic’ and ‘baptist’. The former is described as ‘the sense of historic connectedness with the apostolic tradition following all the way back to the early church and centred in the common confession of the creeds and in the role of bishops as agents of fellowship and relationship’. The latter finds ‘the essence of church not in historic connectedness but in the living presence of Christ by the Spirit among those who believe’.³⁷

As an ‘exercise’ I will now focus on two ‘ecclesiological hurdles’ or – to put it more positively – challenges. What (new) questions and chances arise from approaching baptism and profession from a ‘Believers Church’ perspective? For the purpose of a fruitful debate I will formulate as sharply as possible.

Baptism

When the apostle Paul in Ephesians 4 speaks of one baptism, he refers to the unity of baptism in water and baptism by the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who acts in baptism and creates a new reality. Not only is this new reality related to an inner renewal of the individual, but also to creating a new fellowship in which all barriers have been broken down (Gal. 3:26-29; Eph. 2:13-18). Both are questioned, however, when baptism takes place without an answer of faith induced by the Holy Spirit and made by the person receiving baptism. What then is the relation between ‘old’ and ‘new’ in such a situation? If baptism is more connected to birth than to rebirth, will it not become the opposite of its aim, viz. the confirmation of

³⁶ James D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1977), p. 198.

³⁷ Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State. The Positive Baptist Vision* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005), p. xxv from the ‘Introduction’.

the group identity instead of going beyond it?³⁸ Where can we find the breach and the ‘metanoia’ to a new walk of life? Baptism is closely intertwined with discipleship (Matt. 28:19) and discipleship is a conscious choice to ‘deny oneself, take up your cross and follow Jesus’ (Matt. 16:24). Baptism connects us with heart, body (!) and soul to ‘Jesus’ way’; it forms a total and encompassing connection with him. Is this possible without a conscious individual commitment?

Let nobody suppose that these questions are only intended for ‘infant baptisers’. The demand for a new ethic and a new congregation is as much an issue for those who teach and administer a baptism based on faith. More often than not this is restricted to a ‘private chat’ between the baptised individual and the Lord who saves, and baptism mainly stands for an ‘assurance’ for this salvation. ‘Responsive’ but not ‘responsible’.³⁹ Moreover, persons receiving baptism do not only bear responsibility for their own walk of faith but also for that of others. According to Burkholder an old Anabaptist baptismal question says: ‘Are you prepared to give advice and receive advice?’ He then remarks:

In this connection it may be pointed out that adult baptism is upheld not only because of a Believers’ Church view of sin and salvation, but because prophetic discernment presupposes maturity. The question to put to the candidate for baptism is not only, ‘Have you received forgiveness?’ but, ‘Will you participate in the attempt to understand what is the meaning of the age?’⁴⁰

At a later stage Burkholder poses the exacting but fair question if for most people the Believers Church does not demand a level of devotion and sacrifice which in their opinion surpasses the advantages of belonging to a congregation. My counter-question is whether this aspect is not exactly the essence of the Gospel, which can only be received in the way of sacrifice and the surrender of self.⁴¹ Here we get to the core of the dispute between the Anabaptists and the Reformers of the sixteenth century. Whereas the former only accepted this sacrifice and surrender of oneself by *all* who formed a new congregation along this line (‘bottom up’) the latter preferred a national church (‘top down’) to ‘zum Glauben zu rufen’⁴² by means of instruction, preaching and sacrament. Apart from the issue of which of the

³⁸ See on this the beautiful chapter ‘Baptism and the new humanity’ in John H. Yoder, *Body Politics. Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottdale: Herald Press 1992, ²2001), p. 28-46.

³⁹ McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 268vv.

⁴⁰ J.L. Burkholder in: ‘A People in Community: Contemporary Relevance’, in Garrett (ed.), *The Concept of the Believers’ Church*, p. 176.

⁴¹ Think of Jesus’ words in John 12:24, ‘I tell you for certain that a grain of wheat that falls on the ground will never be more than one grain unless it dies. But if it dies, it will produce lots of wheat’.

⁴² Luther, *Deutsche Messe*, p. 78.

two parties made the best choice – in that day and context – it is certainly legitimate to pose the question if our present time and context do not explicitly require a way ‘from the bottom up’.⁴³

Office

The first thing we should ask ourselves with regard to office is if we must really use this word any longer. Apart from the fact that as such it is nowhere used in the New Testament and that the word *service* seems to be much more fitting, the question is if a ‘start with the Holy Spirit’ does not imply a totally different challenge, viz. that of a charismatic congregation in which the service of *all* members is the starting point (again ‘bottom up’; Eph. 4:16). At Pentecost, in Acts 2, Moses’ lament in Num. 11:29 is unmistakably fulfilled: ‘Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them’. In 1 Cor. 14:31 Paul openly refers to this with regard to the community: ‘For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted’. The Corinthian congregation indeed does not lack a single talent of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 1:7). These gifts were granted to ‘all’, since ‘to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good’. In spite of the unbalanced handling of gifts and the consequent disorder which arose as a result of this, Paul does not refer to office anywhere in the Corinthian Letters. I have always been fascinated by this fact. At that place and at that time it was really useful to institute offices and a form of church order. However, there is no mention of these at all. Paul corrects, he lays down rules, and sees everything from a perspective of love, but at the same time he promotes the use of gifts without any restraint: ‘Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that ye may prophesy. (...) Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy’ (1 Cor. 14:1,5). Paul introduces order and structure, *but no office*. It is remarkable that Stefan Paas discusses the benefit of the office in relation to Corinth, obviously overlooking the fact that this is exactly the only element which is not mentioned by Paul.⁴⁴ It is an advantage that Paas subsequently labels the gifts as ‘an essential condition’ for office, but by that time the ‘damage’ has already been done: the latter is being read from a presupposed ‘official’ perspective. I am quite aware of the fact that there are also ‘charismatic glasses’, which are not interested in the development

⁴³ (Reformed!) Stefan Paas writes in: ‘Ecclesiologie in context. Kerkplanting in de stad’ in *Soteria* 24.4, Dec. 2007: ‘I think that here (in the former sentence he speaks about the ‘free churches’, the puritans and the Mennonites) there is a development of ecclesiological notions *we can gain from now*. These churches have some important marks *which can be highly relevant* in a modern network society’ (my italics).

⁴⁴ Stefan Paas, “‘Zo spreekt de Heer”. (Kerkelijk) gezag in een keuzemaatschappij”, in: *Wapenveld* 58.1, februari 2008, p. 26-34.

of office in parts of the New Testament (Acts, Pastoral Epistles). In this respect the New Testament is undoubtedly not univocal.⁴⁵ It is also impossible unambiguously to answer the question whether we should consider this development within the New Testament as degeneration or as progress. This question is not of great interest anyway. The issue is whether we are bound to a particular (official) structure, or whether we have or should claim space to start ‘afresh’. I do not only have in mind the *priesthood* of all believers, but also the *prophethood* of all believers. So not something or somebody ‘over against’ the congregation – even if they spring from the congregation itself – but the Holy Spirit as the critical entity which corrects us *through brothers and sisters* who *together* hear the Word of God and try to understand it.

The power of the Holy Spirit recognisably present

Following Newbigin, McClendon claims that the question ‘where is the Church?’ is equal to the question ‘Where is the Holy Spirit recognizably present with power?’⁴⁶ For the Holy Spirit it is not impossible to work outside the church. But the Spirit does not particularly prefer this, so to speak. The church is not a mere ‘coincidence’ in the Kingdom of God. It belongs to God’s age-old plan. (Eph. 3:11). In the New Testament it is never about the salvation of (individual) sinners as such, but always about the idea of being added to a new community. Whoever belongs to Christ belongs to the church. And only through and via the church I meet Christ in his fullness (‘together with all saints’, Eph. 3:18). In a New Testament perspective faith without a church falls short of quality and the believer does not do themselves a favour. In his interpretation of Matt. 18:20, Wolf shows that the promise concerning Christ’s presence is not given to the individual believer but to the gathering congregation, and only through the congregation also to the individual person.⁴⁷ For this reason, if the Holy Spirit is to be active in a recognisable way anywhere, then it should be there, in the congregation of believers. Whenever there is such a lack of connection between the present-day community and the New Testament that the one cannot be compared anymore with the other, we have a problem. Somehow we must be able to say ‘This Holy Spirit he has poured

⁴⁵ On this point I find Dunn very convincing, *Unity and Diversity*, especially the chapters VI ‘Concepts of Ministry’ and IX ‘Spirit and Experience’. See also J. Nauta, ‘Flexibele gemeentevormen in de eerste eeuw’ in: *De kerk verbouwen: Dingemans’ ecclesiology critisch bekeken* (Leidse Lezingen; Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1989), p. 11-28 and: A.W. Zwiep, ‘Kerk tussen ideaal en werkelijkheid’ in: *Soteria* 22.4, dec. 2005, p. 30-44.

⁴⁶ McClendon, *Doctrine*, p. 342. Compare Newbigin, *The Household of God*, p. 87vv.

⁴⁷ Wolf, *After Our Likeness*, p. 162: ‘According to this text, Christ’s presence is promised not to the believing individual directly, but rather to the entire congregation, and only through the latter to the individual. This is why no one can come to faith alone and no one can live in faith alone’.

out *this which you see and hear.*' (Acts 2:33). Based on this example, McClendon positions the church between the 'past' of the Bible and the 'future' of the eschaton. By doing so he shows her a double mirror: can what we 'see and hear' be connected with the past and the future? The strength of this question is that it offers an opening to identification *and* critical reflection alike. We can and may connect ourselves with the story of the Holy Scriptures as well as be corrected by it.

'Where is the Holy Spirit recognizably present with power?' Is he to be found in our offices, in the administration of the sacraments, in preaching God's Word? That may be true. No doubt the Holy Spirit may choose to work 'top down'. I wonder, however, whether considering the Holy Spirit's work 'bottom up' provides equal – if not better – opportunities to be the Church of Jesus Christ in the twenty first century.⁴⁸

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⁴⁸ Compare the quotations in footnote 18. Volf writes in his introduction to *After our Likeness*: 'The understanding of the church seems to be moving away from the traditional hierarchical model to the (no longer quite so new) participative models of church configuration. (...) Today's global developments seem to imply that Protestant Christendom of the future will exhibit largely a Free Christian form. (...) It seems to me that we are standing in the middle of a clear and irreversible "process of congregationalization" of all Christianity' (pp. 12, 13). Williams wrote already in 1958 in the same spirit: 'Free-churchmen and state-churchmen, both in lands where a single confession has been established and in lands where the church has been disestablished, are increasingly interested in the experience and principles of the Radical Reformers who were martyrs to a way and organization of Christian life, which, in mitigated circumstances, is or will be the way for almost all Christian bodies almost everywhere in the world today or tomorrow'. George H. Williams, 'Studies in the Radical Reformation (1517-1618)', *Church History*, XXVII, 1958, p. 49, quoted in Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church*, p. 247.

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